ONE-WOMAN CRUSADE

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BY

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CHAPTER ONE

TONI BRADEN had never met Noah Seton. She had gone out of her way to avoid meeting him. Tonight, however, she had no excuse. It was a family party, and family always came first with Toni. No matter what.

Nevertheless, the fact that she had to meet him and pretend to be civil to him only increased Toni's inner outrage over what he had done. It was not the disruption that Noah Seton was causing in her own life. Not at all! She could cope easily enough with that. It was the fear and despair and dislocation he was creating in twenty-seven other lives that formed the basis of her furious discontent.

Somehow she had to rectify the situation. Already she had made some plans, and her mind slid over them before reverting to the cause of all the problems.

Noah Seton!

The very name was anathema to her. He had caused too much pain already to people who were near and dear to her. Take-overs were immoral, she thought fiercely. They should be declared illegal! And men like Noah Seton should be stripped of any respectability and shown up for the callous monsters that they were!

The thought gave Toni some remote satisfaction. Her agile mind swiftly reviewed her wide collection of friends and acquaintances who were in a position to achieve this eminently desirable result. Despite the fact that she knew a wide range of people in Sydney, and many in top-level professions, the only person who really sprang to mind was Diana Goldbach—a gossip columnist—who was too lightweight for Toni's purpose on this important matter.

Which meant she had to do something about it herself. And quickly! Time was fast running out. Constructive action was imperative. And if she got half a chance at this party tonight—no, she would make the chance—she would tackle Noah Seton about the situation he had caused. He could hardly escape

her in her own home. Although confronting him with his inhumanity was almost certainly futile, he being the kind of man he was. She had to come up with some better idea than that.

She picked up the brightest red lipstick she owned and slashed it across her lips. How she would like to make that man bleed in the same way he was bleeding the heart out of people she had come to know and like over the last six years! Of course, the employees whose lives were drastically affected by the take-over meant nothing to Noah Seton. He was simply adding another transport company to his worldwide network. Never mind people like old Mr Templeton who didn't have a hope of re-careering himself when the new broom swept him out of his job. As had already happened. The fear and anxiety that had pervaded the company offices these last few weeks were too real for Toni to shrug off.

Never had she felt less like partying. The sense of indignation and outrage prompted by Noah Seton's unfeeling ruthlessness made the idea of partying almost obscene. Particularly in *his* company!

For all of her twenty-four years Toni had viewed life as a ball, and her aim had always been to extract as much fun out of it as she could. Even her brief foray into marriage had not dimmed her natural exuberance for long. She had shrugged that off as a useful and timely learning experience that she was lucky to get out of with no deep hurt to either side. But there was no fun in this company take-over by Noah Seton. The results were all too real. And Toni was brutally faced with the soul-hitting truth that skating through life was a privilege that few people could afford.

Yet, as much as she had protested at her stepfather's decision to sell his business, she couldn't really blame him for doing so. In purely financial terms the offer had been too good to refuse. And Raymond Clifford was ready to retire. But Toni certainly didn't feel like going downstairs to celebrate Noah Seton's newest acquisition. With the misery he was causing, there was no way in the world she could wish that man well.

Nevertheless, it was expected of her. Her stepfather expected it. Her stepsister expected it; indeed, Jocelyn insisted on it. And no

doubt Noah Seton expected it too. The whole family was putting its best foot forward to encourage his supposed interest in Jocelyn. Although how her stepsister could fancy the idea of marrying a soulless person like Noah Seton was beyond Toni's imagination. It would be like marrying a computer.

She picked up her hairbrush and drove the hard bristles through the thick mass of black curls, forcing them back behind her ear so she could slide in the side-comb which would hold them there. They could tumble everywhere else as wildly as they liked, but she needed a bit of severity to offset the taffeta frill which trailed over one shoulder from the otherwise strapless bodice of her dress. If she had to go and meet that man, she would do it in style! Never let it be said that she let the family down!

All the same, she had mutinously decided to wear black. At least that was a statement of her feelings on the matter, however obscure it might be to anyone else. And no jewellery either! It would be disgustingly distasteful to sparkle when Noah Seton was casting such a blight over other people's lives.

Having savaged her hair into at least temporary order, Toni pushed herself up from the dressing-table and scrutinised her appearance in the cheval-mirror which was positioned near the door for a handy last-minute check. She scowled at the spoiling effect of the deep violet and emerald-green underfrills that gave a vividly dramatic feature to the black taffeta skirt, and peeped out from the ruffle over her shoulder. Why did she have to have such a weakness for rich colour? She didn't even have one classic little black dress in her whole wardrobe like any other sensible woman, and this was one time when her newly sensitised conscience couldn't possibly justify the extravagance of buying something new. Not now that she had been made so aware of the terrible sense of insecurity that a loss of regular income meant. This dress was as black as she had, so it would have to do.

With a disgruntled sigh, Toni dismissed her unsatisfactory reflection and set her mind to getting through this party with a semblance of equanimity. What had to be done had to be done, and it was totally pointless crying over spilt milk. Action was the answer to the

problem. Quick, constructive action that would help everyone into new jobs. Better jobs!

And if Jocelyn was intent on making a disastrous marriage, that was Jocelyn's business. After her own little adventure into the matrimonial state, Toni was hardly in a position to make critical judgements of anyone's choice of a husband. Jocelyn was entitled to make one mistake. She had made hers.

However, Toni's well-meant resolution didn't get beyond the head of the staircase.

'Noah...' her stepfather's voice boomed up from the foyer below. He broke away from the group of guests still hovering at the entrance to the reception-room, and, with his hands outstretched in welcome, strode quickly towards the man who had just been admitted by the butler.

The Clifford household didn't normally have a formal butler, but no expense was being spared on this party tonight. Toni viewed the welcoming scene with stormy green eyes. All to impress Noah Seton, she seethed. And he probably wouldn't even notice half of

it. Mega-millionaires like him were more interested in profitable numbers than anything else. He was thirty-six, Jocelyn had told her, which meant he had to be singularly ruthless to have made all the money he had. Mean and ruthless!

'Looks as if you've got quite a party here, Ray,' came the reply in a surprisingly pleasant voice, deep, but lightly pitched to convey warmth.

Toni didn't listen for her stepfather's undoubtedly modest demur. She was making a jaundiced inventory of Noah Seton's physical assets. He was slightly taller than her stepfather, which made him close to six feet in height. A formal dress-suit invariably flattered most men, but she had to concede that he had quite an impressive physique: broad shoulders tapering down to a lean waist. There was a fullness about his elegantly trousered legs that denied any weediness in that department. Definitely a virile-looking specimen.

His hair was thick and straight, almost as black as his suit, and styled to sweep across the high line of his forehead and tuck neatly

around ears that—much to her chagrin—Toni couldn't take any exception to. However, his face wasn't particularly handsome, which was much more satisfactory. The angles of it were too hard with those high cheekbones, the strong nose, and a sharply defined jawline which had a squarish cut to it. His eyebrows had a distinctive kick with a late arch above the corners of his eyes, and they lent a certain wicked attractiveness to what was a very masculine face. All in all, Toni couldn't see what there was to make Jocelyn feel weak at the knees. If, in fact, she did.

As if some sixth sense alerted him to her angry scrutiny, he suddenly looked up at her. Despite her deep antagonism towards the man, Toni was jolted by the sheer magnetism he projected with that one sharp look. Somehow he diminished everything around him as if he were the only vital element worth acknowledging. He kept on staring at her with almost mesmerising force...eyes so dark that they looked black, but lit with an acute intelligence which seemed all-seeing and all-knowing.

'Ah...there you are, Antonia!' Her step-father's voice held a mildly critical note. 'You're late coming down.'

Toni managed to tear her eyes away from Noah Seton's long enough to direct an apologetic reply. 'Am I, Ray? Sorry! I must have lost track of the time.' For his sake...for Jocelyn's sake...she had to pretend to be civil!

'Well, it looks like time well spent,' Ray said indulgently, slanting his smile up at the man who had broken off their conversation at sight of his stepdaughter.

Noah Seton was totally unaware of Ray Clifford's half-questioning smile. He was totally unaware of anything but the woman who was now descending the long, curving staircase to the foyer. She was not the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He didn't even think of her as beautiful. She was such an intensely vivid entity that beauty was irrelevant. Energy seemed to vibrate from her...a turbulent, electric vitality that engulfed him, challenged him, stunned him. The sheer impact of her was totally riveting. For a moment there—at first sight of her—it had

almost seemed that the earth had shaken under his feet.

It wasn't until she was standing in front of him that he recollected himself enough to notice physical detail: a wild profusion of tight black curls, straight wrathful eyebrows above green eyes that audaciously defied his interest, a delicate little nose that tilted with haughty pride, a mouth that flagrantly invited ravishment—the lower lip curved with sensual fullness, the upper lip provocatively bow-shaped—and a determined little chin, its belligerence undermined by the faint dimple in its centre.

Her face was turned up to his and he suddenly realised how small she was—a head shorter than himself even in high heels. That, too, was somehow surprising. His mind was stamped with the impression of intense female sexuality, a powerhouse of a woman who was larger than life, voluptuously curved and flauntingly feminine.

'Antonia, this is Noah Seton. My step-daughter, Antonia Braden, Noah.'

Ray Clifford's introduction seemed to come from a far-away distance. Noah belatedly

thrust out a hand and forced a smile to his lips. 'I'm delighted to meet you, Antonia.'

Toni was struggling to contain a towering fury. She was incensed that this man should have stared so knowingly at her all the way down the stairs. Every step! It was disgusting—worse than stripping her naked. It was as if he could see into her very soul. He certainly needed putting in his place. She could barely bring herself to touch his hand. Politeness demanded it—particularly in front of her stepfather.

'How do you do, Mr Seton?' she said, deliberately emphasising the formal address. The idea of giving him a piece of her mind had firmed in the last few moments, and, with what she intended to say to him later, an icy approach was definitely called for.

Warm strong fingers enclosed hers in a quite unnecessarily strong grasp. It gave her a nasty trapped feeling. She did not return the pressure.

'I've been waiting a long time for this pleasure,' he said in his seductive, smiling voice.

'I've been waiting a long time for this pleasure, too,' she replied, and in one sense that was certainly true. Later on... Satisfaction might be dearly bought, but buy it she would... when the showdown came.

He poured more charm into his smile. '"She was a phantom of delight, when first she gleamed upon my sight"...'

The words from the poem were so softly intoned that an odd quivery feeling ran through Toni. It was a lovely thing to say. But coming from him! Her outrage moved up a notch.

'You surprise me, Mr Seton... quoting a romantic poet like Wordsworth,' she mocked, letting him know that she knew those words didn't come from his soul. He undoubtedly had a memory like a computer too! Her eyes blazed her scorn at his attempt to sweet-talk her. 'And, apart from anything else,' she added loftily, 'It is not accurate. I am certainly not a phantom.'

'Nor would I wish you to be, Antonia,' was the smooth rejoinder, his eyes dancing with pleasure and a very definite glint of sexual anticipation.

Toni fumed. He shouldn't be looking at her like that when he had come here to be with Jocelyn! The man had no sense of decency. No conscience at all. Toni's sense of discretion fled in the face of this further proof of his perfidy. If ever anyone needed to be taught a few lessons, Noah Seton was that person!

'No one except Ray calls me Antonia. All my friends call me Toni.' She offered him a smile that had been invented by Lucrezia Borgia as she poisoned her enemies. 'You, Mr Seton, may call me Miss Braden.'

A loaded little silence followed. For the first time he seemed lost for words. These small pin-pricks to his arrogance were definitely needed, Toni assured herself.

Then Jocelyn arrived on the scene. Which was probably very timely, considering the amount of dangerously heating steam that Toni was suppressing for her stepfather's sake. Noah Seton was still holding her hand in an infuriatingly possessive manner, and, short of staging an undignified tug of war with him, Toni couldn't see how to disengage

it. She was more than happy for Jocelyn to claim him . . . for the time being.

'Have you been holding Noah up, talking business again, Dad?' Jocelyn chided good-humouredly as she wound her arm around Noah Seton's. This loosened his grip on Toni's hand and she quickly retrieved it.

Ray gave a laugh that was tinged with relief. 'Not at all, my dear. I was just performing introductions. You can take him away now.'

'He's all yours!' Toni added with feeling.

Jocelyn shot her an anxious look which begged a number of questions. Toni managed a reassuring smile, although she felt like a terrible hypocrite. Yet she couldn't help herself. It was second nature to her to save Jocelyn worry, no matter how serious the situation was. From the very beginning of their relationship her younger stepsister had brought out a strongly protective instinct in Toni. Although Jocelyn had overcome her stutter in her teens—her voice was beautifully modulated now—and there was no real reason for Toni to fight any more battles for her stepsister's sake, the instinct was still there.

'You look lovely, Jocelyn!' she rushed out with genuine sincerity, while mentally stabbing Noah Seton for not saying it.

'Beautiful...as always,' he came in on cue, having finally focused his attention on the woman who had invited him here.

It squeezed Toni's heart to see how his belated compliment literally illuminated Jocelyn's face with a beauty that was far more than skin-deep. Her stepsister deserved someone better than Noah Seton, someone who would love and cherish her for the rest of her life, and who would never look at another woman! Although why he was even tempted to was beyond Toni's comprehension. In her opinion, no other woman could hold a candle to Jocelyn.

She had a perfect face. Every feature was classically moulded, and those fascinating amber eyes could glow golden with warmth—as now. Even her hair was honey and gold, styled in a long silky fall which curled softly around her shoulders. She was tall and wonderfully willowy, always looking supremely elegant in anything she wore, and the bronze silk gown she had chosen for tonight looked

fabulous on her superbly slim figure. She had set it off brilliantly with a gold choker that only someone with Jocelyn's long, graceful neck could have worn successfully.

Toni was not given to envy. Envy was a waste of time which could be far better spent on doing whatever could be done with her own life. But, if she had been given a choice on her own physical construction, she would have chosen Jocelyn as the ideal model. It seemed positively perverse of Noah Seton to even glance back at her now that Jocelyn had joined them. But he did. Fixing those devilishly knowing black eyes on hers in deliberate challenge.

'Are you coming with us to join the party...Miss Braden?' he asked silkily.

Ray instantly placed a restraining hand on Toni's arm. 'I want to have a private word with Antonia first. You two go ahead.' He smiled benevolently. 'Enjoy yourselves.'

'Don't be long with Toni, Dad,' Jocelyn warned, throwing a happy grin at her older stepsister. 'Everyone's been asking where you are. No party really begins without you, Toni.'

Noah Seton at least had the grace to go with Jocelyn without further ado, and Toni succumbed to her stepfather's hand-pressure and was drawn into the library on the other side of the foyer.

'That wasn't very friendly, Antonia,' he started as soon as the door was safely shut behind them. 'I know you're upset by the take-over, but Noah Seton is a guest in our house and——'

'He was the first to be rude!' Toni broke in, exploding into action to release some of her pent-up feelings. She stalked up and down the carpet, her hands flying out to emphasise her excuse. 'You saw him, Ray. The way he stared at me. As if I were some new kind of specimen that had to be categorised. And then he flirted...flirted!' Her voice rose several decibels. 'You heard what he said. He had no right to flirt with me. He's been courting Jocelyn. My very own sister. It was downright disgusting of him to try that kind of turn-on with me. That man is heartless, Ray. All brain, no feeling. He's going to bring Jocelyn nothing but grief!'

'Antonia...' It was a heavy sigh. 'I stared at you too. Whenever you make an entrance people stare at you. You're like...' he cast around helplessly for words to describe the startling force of nature that she somehow encapsulated, then gave her a lop-sided smile 'like a supernova bursting through the universe, displacing everything else. In vivid Technicolor.'

The straight eyebrows formed a V of emphatic displeasure. 'I don't mean to be.'

'Antonia, you simply are,' Ray explained patiently. 'When I married your mother and you came into this household, it was like suddenly acquiring a live-in tornado. And there's never been a dull moment since. That's no criticism of you, my dear. I wouldn't like to see you any other way. You've brightened our lives immeasurably. All I'm really saying is that Noah Seton reacted to you as any other man would.'

'What about his supposed attachment to Jocelyn?' Toni protested. No matter how Ray explained it, she had felt signals coming from Noah Seton that weren't right. Not if every-

thing was the way it should be between him and Jocelyn.

'I have no doubt that Noah finds Jocelyn very attractive. In a different way. Initial impact is one thing. Whether one follows it up is something else again. Let me remind you that you control that, Antonia. The woman always does. But it is ungracious to be heavy-handed about it.'

Toni grimaced a partial surrender. 'I'll try to remain polite. But I don't like him, Ray. It's no use saying I do.'

'You haven't given him much of a chance, Antonia,' Ray reminded her with mild irony.

Noah Seton hadn't given a lot of people much of a chance, Toni silently argued. 'I don't see how you can say "in vivid Technicolor" when I'm wearing black!' she said out loud, still deeply affronted by the way Noah Seton had acted towards her.

Ray Clifford viewed her with indulgent amusement. He could almost see sparks flying from her, and it had nothing to do with the colour of her dress. It never would have. 'There is a touch of violet and green,' he pointed out. 'And while we're on the subject

of dress, Antonia, we must have a talk about charge accounts soon. Now that I'm retired, there won't be the same cash flow we've had in the past. I don't mean to stint you, but perhaps a little less extravagance could be in order.'

Toni flushed with guilty shame. She hadn't even looked at the price-tag of this dress when she had bought it, but she was wretchedly aware that the boutique at Double Bay didn't stock anything much under seven hundred dollars. And then there were the high-fashion shoes on her feet...

All these years she had dashed off a signature for oodles of expensive clothes without giving it a second thought, as if it were all hers by right, while other people struggled just to survive from pay-cheque to pay-cheque. What she was wearing tonight could probably keep poor old Mr Templeton for a month.

The green eyes lifted to her stepfather were filled with pained apology. 'I'm sorry, Ray. I've taken everything you've given me so much for granted. And I should be keeping myself now. I should have——'

'Antonia....' He shook his head as he took the few paces to reach her and curl his hands around her shoulders. She was such an unpredictable creature, full of wild extremes and passionate feelings erupting in so many different directions that he had never been able to keep up with any of them. But he would not have her any other way. 'Don't take what I said so much to heart, my dear. I love to see you all dressed up in whatever finery you choose.'

He wasn't reaching her. He could sense the turbulent emotions which overrode his words. He lifted one hand and stroked her flushed cheek with tender concern. 'Antonia, it is my pleasure to keep you in the best manner I can. Don't deprive me of that. And now don't make me feel I've spoiled this party for you. It is also my pleasure to see you enjoying yourself. Come, my dear. Smile for me.'

She smiled, her heart overflowing with a burst of love for this man who had been a father to her ever since she was ten years old. His hair was white now, the blue eyes not so bright as they used to be, his handsome face grown heavy with the years, but his kindness

to her had never waned, however much of a trial she'd been to him at times. She threw her arms around his rather portly waist and gave him a fierce hug.

'I promise I'll be more considerate in the future, Ray,' she cried fervently.

'That could be very dull,' he replied with an affectionate chuckle. 'But somehow I don't think it will be.'

She lifted rueful eyes. 'I don't know how you've put up with me.'

He tweaked her curls. 'Somewhere along the line it got addictive. And we'd better get moving if this party can't begin without you.'

Toni made a scoffing noise which Ray ignored. He tucked her arm firmly around his and escorted her to the reception-room. Their entrance caused an immediate stir among the crowd of guests. Ray smiled to himself as he felt the wave of anticipation, the charge of raised excitement. Toni was swept from his side to form the nucleus of a suddenly animated group of people. The party was about to start swinging.

Noah Seton's eyes had fastened on Toni the moment she stepped through the doorway.

She had felt them, been drawn to them, and was now defying their magnetic pull on her, effervescing with almost manic energy to everyone in her immediate vicinity.

She would get to him before this party ended, she determined. Then she would give him everything she had planned! It was very clear to her that neither Ray nor Jocelyn understood what kind of man they were dealing with. It was well past time that Noah Seton was faced with the truth about himself!

And from across the room Noah Seton watched her, silently determined that before this night was over he would get to her. He could not forget the super-spiked electrical charge that had jolted his body when he first saw her. Nor could he forget her antagonism towards him. Obviously some things needed to be put right.

He vaguely wondered if all his plans and schemes might suddenly be going astray. The thought was tossed aside with a mocking smile. No, he knew precisely where he was heading. He had spent the first part of his life on building a fortune that could virtually

multiply by its own weight. He now needed a suitable companion to share the rest of it.

Jocelyn Clifford could make him the right kind of wife. She would give him the right kind of children. And he was ready to do the right thing by her in return. Marriage was just the same as a business, and he had calculated the profit and loss. With Jocelyn the balance was tilted to an acceptable level. Controlled judgement was always the key to success.

In the meantime, it was necessary to administer to that pert little dynamo a very chastening lesson. One thing he didn't need was a problem with Jocelyn's stepsister. He would certainly get to *Miss Braden* before this party ended.

CHAPTER TWO

TONI was not enjoying herself. She worked very hard at appearing to do so, and certainly no one questioned her performance. Her frenetic gaiety seemed infectious to everyone who came in contact with her. Conversation bubbled with wild wit. She danced up a storm that swept everyone up and raged through every room, right out to the back patio. She was, to all intents and purposes, in scintillating party form.

Only she knew how conscious she was of Noah Seton's presence, of those dark eyes continually finding her, boring into her, infuriating her more and more with their probing intensity. He played the part of attentive suitor to her stepsister with a suave sophistication that would have been admirable if Toni didn't know better. He didn't have his mind or heart in that role. He was watching *her*. Waiting—as she was waiting—for the

right opportunity...although she had no doubt that he had an entirely different purpose from hers.

Eventually a sumptuous buffet supper was laid on by the catering people. Toni was not hungry. Her insides were churning far too much to appreciate the various delicacies that were urged on her by friends who were eager to tempt her appetite. She nibbled some smoked salmon and sipped champagne for form's sake while she surreptitiously watched Noah Seton.

He mixed effortlessly. Toni couldn't help admiring the way he could gather a group of people around himself and keep them all entertained. As much as she might resent it, there was no denying his personal magnetism.

He did not stay continually with Jocelyn. On the other hand, he did not approach Toni either. It almost seemed to Toni that he was creating an effect. Every move was superbly calculated. Still, she imagined she had a surprise or two in store for him.

Her mind was fermenting with a number of alternative ideas when she was approached by Lillian Devereux, one of the dearest friends

her mother had had in the decade or so before she died. Just the sight of Lillian gave Toni a sharp twinge of loss. It had been six years now, but she still missed her mother. She probably always would.

'Toni, may I catch you for a minute?' Lillian appealed with all the charm that had made successful appeals for many worthwhile causes.

Unlike many women who sat on charity committees for the social éclat rather than any real sense of caring, Lillian Devereux genuinely wanted to help those in need, particularly the physically handicapped. She was a diabetic herself, and not in the best of health, but she was still prepared to work tirelessly for those less fortunate.

'Of course, Mrs Devereux,' Toni complied, forcing herself out of her preoccupation with Noah Seton, and throwing a gaily dismissive smile to her companions as she moved forward to take the woman's outstretched hands. She squeezed them gently in affectionate greeting. 'I do like that pinky mauve shade you've put through your hair. It's very feminine and flattering.' And, in truth, Lillian

really did look quite lovely dressed in a floating pink and mauve dress that played down her plumpness and toned with her new hairdo.

A hand instantly lifted to primp the soft waves. Her smile beamed with pleasure. 'I'm so glad you think so. I really needed a lift. Things have gone from bad to worse. My cook has left me and I'm having terrible trouble replacing her. But that's not what I meant to talk to you about. You can't cook. But what we have to do...Toni, we simply have to raise money for the deaf children. You must have heard about those wonderful new bionic ear implants?'

'Jocelyn was telling me about them,' Toni acquiesced. She had a sinking feeling about what was coming. Her stepsister spent three days a week at the Camperdown Children's Hospital working on an art-therapy programme for the chronically ill patients. Somehow Toni never had the time available to do these things on a permanent basis, but Mrs Devereux had found a way of using her talents that took up a prodigious amount of time.

'Just think...little children who have never heard before. It's a marvellous thing. But every implant costs more than fifteen thousand dollars. And then there's all the post-operative work, teaching them the skills of hearing, comprehending sounds and speaking...all the things most children have learnt naturally. There's no subsidy from the State Government for it either,' Lillian explained earnestly. 'I think we should aim for a million dollars, Toni.'

'Never aim too low,' Toni quickly agreed, feeling restive under what looked like becoming a long-winded one-minute chat.

'The theme you suggested for the Blind Society Ball last year dragged everybody in. We need a big event, Toni. And you're so good at ideas. I just know you'll be able to come up with something so original and exciting that people will open their pockets as they've never been opened before.'

The expectant sparkle in Lillian Devereux's soft brown eyes really put Toni on the spot. She had so much else on her mind, so much more pressing business that had to be ur-

gently dealt with. Like opening Noah Seton's pocket! And his cold computer mind!

'Let me think about it, Mrs Devereux,' she procrastinated. The ball last year had been fun. Every charity do she had ever suggested had been fun. But Toni wasn't in a fun mood tonight. She forced a reassuring smile. 'If I come up with something, I'll let you know.'

'Please do think about it, Toni,' the older woman pressed. 'Such a worthwhile cause. My little grandniece, Emily...she is one of the ones...' Her voice trailed off, her private distress plain on her face.

Toni resolved to put her mind to it as soon as she had the time. She knew how much she'd hate to be in a soundless world. For one thing, it would deprive her of the opportunity to give Noah Seton the telling off he deserved!

Out of the corner of her eye she saw her stepsister talking to him, then giving his arm a quick squeeze and moving away. Heading towards the powder-room, Toni figured. Jocelyn had an obsession about repairing her make-up after she had eaten. Inspiration leapt to Toni's tongue.

'Have you talked to Jocelyn about it, Mrs Devereux? You'll need to get her in on this. I'm sure she would be interested. She works miracles with children—any children at all. Why don't you have a chat to her while you're here? She might be able to come up with some suggestions.'

'Yes. I'll bring Jocelyn in on it too,' she said with bright enthusiasm, her eyes instantly darting around the crowd for her next quarry. 'If you'll excuse me, Toni . . .'

The moment her back was turned Toni swung towards Noah Seton. Their eyes clashed, a mutuality of purpose blazing between them. Almost at the same instant he started his move towards her, collecting a glass of champagne from a waiter's tray on the way. He brought it to her, an obvious offering since he already had one in his other hand.

'All these hours of chatting, Miss Braden. Undoubtedly you must feel quite dry,' he drawled lightly, projecting an easy charm that didn't fool Toni for one second. The black eyes were watching, weighing, collecting knowledge.

'How *thoughtful* of you, Mr Seton,' she replied icily.

He had a good poker face. There was not the minutest reaction to her subtle taunt. 'Perhaps I should call you Mrs Sheldon,' he rolled out blandly. 'Would you be more comfortable with that?'

Toni made a mental note to tell Jocelyn she should not talk freely about her to the enemy. Only she couldn't use the word 'enemy'. That would be in bad taste, considering Jocelyn's present inclinations.

'I am no longer married,' she stated, just as blandly.

'It didn't work out?' he asked, injecting a note of sympathetic interest.

'That is a masterpiece of understatement. The idea of marriage is fine. It's what happens afterwards that's the problem.' Her eyes stabbed home the point. He wouldn't make Jocelyn happy. Toni could feel it in her bones. 'Perhaps it's something you should take into consideration, Mr Seton.'

'It must have been really bad,' he concluded. His mouth took on a sardonic little curl. 'Undoubtedly it was all his fault.'

'That's personal!' Toni snapped.

The sharpness in his riveting dark eyes seemed to intensify. 'You don't like me for some reason.'

Toni's mouth curled. 'That's another masterpiece of understatement.'

'What precisely do you feel?'

Her chin lifted in defiance of any pretence to politeness. 'Hate is a fair approximation.'

He didn't even flinch. 'Tell me why.'

'If I do it here, Mr Seton, I might explode.' The green eyes blazed the high probability of that, and her voice could have cut steel as she explained her restraint. 'Not that I mind making a scene. You deserve one. A big one. But, unlike you, I do consider other people, and I don't wish to upset either Jocelyn or Ray.'

He smiled, like a crocodile about to feed well. 'My sentiments exactly. Perhaps the rose-garden?'

A warning tingle crawled down Toni's spine. He was dangerous. Men like him should be put in a cage marked 'Don't Feed the Animals'. Nevertheless, the rose-garden would still be relatively private at this early

hour. Later on might be a different matter, but right now it should suit her purpose. Wilfully intent on taking a piece out of him, Toni ignored the danger signals her body was registering. Noah Seton couldn't do anything to her. She wouldn't let him!

Her smile outshone any of Lucrezia Borgia's. 'My own choice exactly! It will give me much pleasure to show you the blood-red blooms of Alamein, the best of Mr Lincoln, and the fine division in colour of York and Lancaster.'

The rose-garden had been her mother's pride and joy, and there wasn't one bush she hadn't identified to Toni a thousand times. It gave Toni an intensely personal satisfaction to name the roses which signified the kind of conflict she had in store for Noah Seton.

His eyes returned a glittering challenge. 'I have a partiality towards Double Delight myself.' Then, while Toni was still startled that he should know the name of any rose, he slid his arm around her waist and smoothly turned her towards the opened doors which led on to the back patio. 'I suggest we go now.'

'Don't you dare touch me!' she hissed at him, sizzlingly aware of the hand resting on the curve of her hip. 'Anywhere!' she added emphatically when the hand slid back to her arm.

One black eyebrow kicked higher as he took in the furious sparks in her eyes. 'It's that serious?'

'Yes,' she bit out through clenched teeth. His 'Double Delight' comment was just sinking in, giving rise to a lot of connotations that didn't bear thinking about. She felt extremely hot and bothered, but still determined to get the better of him.

He dropped his hand and they walked together, in apparently friendly accord, towards the agreed-upon confrontation. No one attempted to interrupt their progress through the crowd. In fact, a clear path opened up for them. Quite simply the innate power of both their personalities—now joined in mutual purpose—intimidated any competition for their separate attention. They left the party behind them without a question being asked.

As the brightness of the lights from the patio diminished, and the shadows of the

rose-garden grew darker, Toni became more and more aware of the man at her side. Reluctantly and bitterly she acknowledged what her body had been signalling all night. There was a strong sexual attraction between them. But her marriage had put that particular problem in its proper perspective. Sex was a fine natural thing between a man and a woman. Occasionally it was necessary in order to be normal, but, apart from that, it was only a distraction from real issues. Nevertheless, the distraction was rather disturbing . . . out here in the night . . . alone with him.

'Why don't you admit that the reason for your hostility is simply that you feel threatened by me?'

He slid the question out in a mild tone that nevertheless sliced straight under Toni's skin. She came to a dead halt and glared at him in incredulous scorn. 'In what way do you imagine you threaten me, Mr Seton?'

He faced her with all the arrogant confidence in the world. 'You're attracted to me, and you don't like it. Either because of some hangover from your marriage, or because it makes you feel disloyal towards your step-

sister, or a combination of both. Hate is a defence against something you can't control.'

'How wrong you are!' she scoffed, contemptuously dismissing his argument. 'Hate is inspired by actions. Your actions, Mr Seton. And I hated you before I ever laid eyes on you. And not for the psychological claptrap that you've just spouted!'

'Then please enlighten me.' His mouth quirked. 'You look even more intensely beautiful when you're totally furious. It makes you come alive with a vibrancy and colour that outshines all the roses. A spotlight of brilliant energy.'

'You're not taking this seriously!' she accused, frustrated by his manner and upset by the compliments which she found decidedly improper, considering his relationship with Jocelyn.

His hand lifted and stroked softly down her burning cheek. 'Is there some reason why I should?' he asked, his voice a low caress that increased her inner turbulence.

Toni bit her lip. When she had projected this meeting in her mind she had imagined a lot of things, but not that Noah Seton

wouldn't take her seriously. And that touch on her cheek...tingling through her...his closeness so disturbing in the soft cocoon of the night. She stepped back a half-pace, re-emphasising her rejection of any physical contact with him and establishing a distance that her eyes reinforced.

The realisation came that there was no point in throwing threats at Noah Seton, as she had intended to do. She was sure now that he would just laugh at her. She would have to implement them. He couldn't laugh at action. So she had to go ahead and demonstrate what he should have done by doing it herself.

She had reached a watershed in her life, a point of no return. It had happened before...when her mother had died...when her marriage had ended...and this was another time when she had to take stock and make another decisive turn. The fierce anger bubbling inside her subsided, to be replaced by iron determination. Noah Seton would pay dearly for this.

And one thing could be settled right now. He had given her the opening to test what he

really felt for Jocelyn. Although there was probably nothing she could do about it, Toni wanted to know if her judgement was correct.

'You should not be looking at other women,' she began tersely. 'You should not be attracted——'

'Until such time as I marry, I'll look at whomsoever I please,' he returned equably. 'As yet I've made no commitment to your stepsister. Nor she to me. I'm in a position where I have the choice of many roses, Miss Braden. It would not augur well for future harmony to choose one whose loveliness is diminished by an attachment of prickly thorns.'

He paused to let that sink in before pointedly adding, 'I see your irrational antagonism towards me as a serious impediment in any relationship with you . . . or Jocelyn. I want to sort it out.'

Cold and calculating, Toni affirmed. No flame of love or passion would ever sway his judgement. He only cared about what suited him. Never mind what Jocelyn might feel! And the arrogance of the man, to think he could have any woman he chose! Toni hoped

that Jocelyn had the good sense to throw him out of her life and shut the door in his face.

Her hands automatically came up to rest on her hips. It was a pose that anyone who knew her would have recognised as trouble with a capital T. It reinforced the determination on her face. 'The feelings I have are anything but irrational, Mr Seton. As you are about to find out.'

She was totally unaware that the paleness of her hands on the black dress picked out the tininess of her waist and the sumptuous curve of her hips. Noah Seton forced his eyes up to hers. 'Fine! I'll just put my hands away so I won't be tempted to offend you again,' he drawled, placing them behind his back in a deliberately patient fashion that was meant to offend.

Somehow the action drew attention to the rest of him. For a moment, Toni lost her grip on all the ideas that had been bursting through her head. Noah Seton was overpoweringly masculine. It stirred something in her that threatened the normal clarity of her thinking. She had to make a concentrated effort to drag Mr Templeton back to the forefront of her

mind. He, and the others like him who had lost their jobs, were worth fighting for.

'Now, tell me what this is all about,' Noah Seton invited in the kind of tone one would use with a recalcitrant child.

It helped Toni concentrate her mind wonderfully. Her thoughts meshed into a burning bolt of anger. 'How many people were fired after you completed this take-over?' she shot at him.

Surprise flitted over his face, but he replied with slow, measured consideration. 'I'm not sure. I have people who look after that side of our operations. I suppose twenty or thirty. That would be normal for a company of this size.'

Toni's indignation rose to full flood. 'You just don't care, do you? They're nothing but numbers to you. Not people with needs and wants and feelings——'

'When I take over a company, Miss Braden,' he cut in with cool precision, 'I aim to run it more successfully than was done before. I have a responsibility to my shareholders to do that. Whatever is necessary to achieve that purpose is done. Like surgery,

some things are painful. You've got to cut away the dead wood in the operation——'

'How would you like to be considered dead wood?' Toni blasted back at him. 'I'll bet you wouldn't like it. Cut adrift like unwanted flotsam and jetsam! You wouldn't like it one bit. Not one bit more than the people you've done it to. Not if you had any feelings at all.'

His mouth thinned as if he had to make an effort to hold himself in. 'Why don't you tell me your problem? I'll see what can be done about it.'

A sense of triumph boosted Toni's fiery indignation. 'There are twenty-seven people who haven't got a job because of you. You didn't know that. Not precisely. And you didn't know them. Not as individuals——'

'Then there are twenty-seven individuals who have replaced those people,' he returned coolly. 'They've got the jobs. What do you propose? Do you want me to fire efficient executives and replace them with the old staff? How am I supposed to justify that?'

Toni's triumph crashed into frustration. 'Why did you fire our people in the first place? They're not dead wood! They're good,

reliable workers. They've been with us for years. Every one of them. You couldn't get any more loyal and dedicated workers than Mr Templeton and——'

'Who is Mr Templeton?'

'See! You don't even know them! You never even looked to find out what you were doing. You're gobbling up other people's lives and——'

'Now just hold on a minute!' he rapped out. His arms whipped out from behind his back and grabbed her shoulders.

Toni forgot what she was saying. Suddenly there was something very formidable and threatening about the breadth of his chest. And somehow he seemed to have grown taller, the hard planes of his face harder. The way his hands squeezed into her flesh didn't help to slow her pulse-rate either. Her heart was thumping madly against the constriction of her chest.

'I do not run a charity,' he said, clipping each word out with biting control. 'I run a business. And a business will die if it's not changed over the years. Grow or die. There is no other way. Your stepfather ran his

company as an old family business, and it does not meet the needs of a modern transport network. It was dying on its feet. Moribund! We have to computerise the office-work, change schedules, expand and vitalise. That means staffing changes whether you like it or not, Miss Braden. We've kept all the drivers——'

'You could have tried retraining our people!' she shot at him in fierce rebuttal. 'You didn't have to take their jobs!'

'It's standard practice. Retraining takes time! With no guarantee that they have the capability of being retrained!' he retorted with savage impatience. His fingers dug deeper as if he wanted to shake her. 'Be reasonable!'

'It's so easy for you to say that, isn't it?' she seethed. 'It's not your livelihood being threatened. You're safe and secure up on your pinnacle!'

'And so are you! You've still got your job. Always will. And I'll be delighted to have you working for us——'

'Well, that's one delight you won't have because I haven't got a job with you! And you

reliable workers. They've been with us for years. Every one of them. You couldn't get any more loyal and dedicated workers than Mr Templeton and——'

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'And so are you! You've still got your job. Always will. And I'll be delighted to have you working for us——'

'Well, that's one delight you won't have because I haven't got a job with you! And you

can get your hands off my person altogether, Noah Seton! Right now!'

His eyes glittered down at her for long, tense seconds. Toni had the forceful impression that he was in two minds as to whether to throttle her or kiss her. Violence shimmered in the small space between them, knotting her nerves and making her pulse run riot. When he finally complied with her demand, he walked away from her for a few paces.

Toni gulped in a few much-needed breaths of clear air. There was an awful fluttery weakness in her stomach. She hastily revised her opinion about Noah Seton's having no feelings. But no way in the world was she going to let him intimidate her. In fact, it gave her a secret sense of triumph to know that she had rocked his control. When he swung around to take up their conversation again, his face was wiped clear of any betraying expression of his thoughts, but Toni noticed that his hands were tightly clenched.

'It was specifically written into the agreement by Ray that you would be retained by the company, Miss Braden,' he stated

evenly. 'I always make a point of honouring agreements.'

Her chin came up in proud defiance. 'Ray misunderstood my position on the matter. He thought the job was enough for me. What I actually wanted was to run the company when he retired. And I could have done it, too. But I couldn't convince him that I would never marry again. He's got these old-fashioned ideas——'

'So at last we come to the crux of your hostility!' Noah Seton said with grim satisfaction. '*I've* got what *you* wanted.'

Her eyes flashed her scorn for his conclusion. 'Wrong again! Ray got what he wanted, and that was what was important. I've got personal regrets that he didn't want to trust the company to me, but that is his business and fair enough. The crux of my hostility, Mr Seton, is what *you* are doing to *our* people!' she asserted vehemently.

He frowned, obviously not liking to have his judgement flouted. 'That really concerns you?' he tested.

'Yes! I'll make my own way regardless of what happens! As for my job with *your*

company, I've resigned. There's no way I'd work for you. In point of fact, I was only waiting until Monday to do it more effectively.'

'What did you have in mind?' he asked sharply.

She glared at him. 'Do you tell people what you're going to do when you plan a takeover?'

'No.'

'Then I'm not telling you what I'm going to do. One thing only is certain. I've got to do something for all those people that you've dumped on the scrap-heap. And you're going to pay for what you've done. I've got friends in high places. One way or another you'll find out what it's like to get hurt.'

His chest expanded as he drew in a deep breath. The tightly clenched fingers uncurled and he lifted one hand in an open gesture of appeasement. 'Look at it this way,' he invited, pitching his tone to pleasant persuasion. 'This is all unnecessary. We're going to expand the present business of this transport company. We'll be creating jobs.'

'That's no consolation to the people who haven't got one now because of you,' she retorted obdurately.

His hand sliced an impatient dismissal. 'I can't be responsible for everyone. In this society some people are winners and some people are losers. In this case, there are going to be far more winners than losers.'

'Well, I'm on the side of the losers! I'm fighting for them. And their rights. The trouble with you is that you're just a computer that makes decisions according to——'

'Miss Braden, enough is enough!' he cut in, his tone one of studied weariness. 'Give it away. Let's settle this matter in a civilised manner. You can't win——'

'I didn't say I was going to win,' she retorted fiercely. 'I said I was going to fight on.'

'Better to deal...if you have any bargaining sense at all,' he retaliated.

Toni shut her mouth. She didn't trust him—not after all she had learned about him—but if he was prepared to make concessions, she was not about to jeopardise any hope for other people until she found out what he intended.

He spread both hands in conciliatory appeal. 'I want us to be friends...'

'Mr Seton, I can read you like a book,' she said with arch scepticism. 'You want it to be easy.'

He regarded her silently for several moments and there was a knowingness in his eyes that Toni found intensely discomfiting. Then his gaze roved slowly down to her feet and up again, as if taking a detailed inventory of all that she was. A faint self-mocking smile curled his mouth.

'I find you a very disturbing element in my life,' he said, as though he was surprised by the fact.

Toni was still burning from having been subjected to the insolence of his appraisal. 'By the time I've finished you'll be a lot more disturbed, I can assure you of that,' she said heatedly.

'I'll be at the company offices on Monday. Come to me then and we'll talk about what can be done.'

Toni seethed at his casual assumption of control. She was not about to go to him as some supplicant. That wasn't the way to

bargain. 'You come to me on Monday and tell me what you can do,' she retorted.

His eyes narrowed. 'You won't resign, Miss Braden.'

'I have resigned. I'll only be going in to finish up a few things.'

'You're a very implacable young woman.'

'You're a monster of a man.'

His face broke into a grin that totally disarmed Toni. She was jolted by a sudden and sharp appreciation of what Jocelyn saw in him. The magnetic intelligence of those disturbing dark eyes was nothing to the mesmerising charm of that grin. It was positively indecent, considering the soulless nature of the man.

'You've made your position clear. Now, let's leave it until Monday,' he said with a most unsettling throb of anticipation in his voice. 'Meanwhile, the night is still young and you haven't shown me the roses you promised me. Please lead on.'

Toni was gripped by a sense of uncertainty that was totally foreign to her. Noah Seton was right. She had said all she meant to say at this point. However, every instinct told her

it was dangerous to stay with him, out here in the rose-garden. On the other hand, to retreat felt equally wrong. He was throwing out a challenge that had to be met if she was to prove herself an adversary to be reckoned with.

Deeply suspicious of his motives, but determined to play the pretence out, Toni strolled forward casually and began identifying the roses on either side of them as they continued around the path. Noah Seton made appreciative comments that she couldn't take exception to, but his eyes sparkled with some secret amusement that told Toni better than words that he intended manipulating this scene to his advantage. Or her disadvantage. Computer was too good a name for him. He was a cold, calculating devil! And that quick grin he had was the wickedest thing in his armoury!

It was more of a relief than an embarrassment to Toni when they came face to face with Jocelyn emerging from the trellised walkway that supported all the climbing roses. She was arm in arm with another man, and

Toni instantly seized the opportunity to part with Noah Seton.

Ignoring the shadow of dismay that flitted over Jocelyn's face at the sight of them together, Toni brightly demanded an introduction to her stepsister's companion, took charge of him herself with a burst of gay chatter, then swept him back to the party, leaving Jocelyn with the blithe admonition to continue indulging Noah Seton's fascination with the rose-garden.

The strong sense of those black eyes boring into her back made Toni bubble with elation. She had foiled Noah Seton's *game*—*whatever* it was—and when next they *met she would be* more than ready for *anything he might do or* say. She would *make Monday a red-letter day* in his life's diary! *He certainly wouldn't be* grinning *when she'd finished taking him* apart. *And there would be no amusement left* in his *eyes either!*

CHAPTER THREE

As Toni steered Jocelyn's erstwhile escort back to the party, she silently vowed that she would not look at Noah Seton again tonight. She would not give him that satisfaction. He might be a sexy male animal, but she was not attracted to him in anything other than a physical sense—which was inconvenient and unfortunate—and she would give him absolutely nothing on which to feed his monumental ego.

Tomorrow she would begin organising *events*. There was no doubt now that threats against Noah Seton were hopelessly idle. She would have to proceed with more concrete plans. On Monday she could...

'Just who the hell do you think you are?'

Toni looked up at her hijacked companion in startled surprise. Clearly he was put out for some reason, and she instantly set about lifting his spirits again, her reply bubbling

with the exhilaration of the moment, her eyes inviting a return to good humour, her mouth teasing with laughter.

'I'm the thorn upon the rose...the joker in the pack...the cat among the pigeons...the phantom of the opera... Oh, a lot of wonderful things I never realised before!'

He didn't smile. But a sense of power zinged through Toni's veins as she began to comprehend the leverage Noah Seton had given her by admitting he wanted to be friends with her. He would have to do a lot of earning to get that friendship! Maybe that was what he'd been trying to do in the garden—playing at *being nice*! As if she would be fooled by that!

However, that was not the present issue. Richard—she couldn't recall his surname—was not only unsmiling, he was grimly unamused. He was actually looking balefully at her. It hardened the sensitive lines of his handsome face and sharpened the vivid blue of his eyes. He was very good-looking, although Toni didn't particularly go for men with blond hair.

'That was a fair description of yourself until you got to the phantom of the opera,' he said caustically. 'I found *him* a sympathetic character.'

Obviously Richard felt no sympathy with her. 'Is something wrong?' Toni asked, doing her best to sober her wayward thoughts and concentrate on the problem. Clearly she had offended him. Badly.

'Yes! Thanks to you and your uninvited interference!' he said acidly. 'Until you came along everything was all right. I was in the rose-garden. I was with Jocelyn——'

'I'm sorry——'

'So you should be!' he snapped, his eyes glinting with angry frustration. 'In future, would you be kind enough to stay with the companion of your choice?'

'I said I'm sorry,' Toni repeated earnestly. 'But the truth of the matter is that Noah Seton is not my choice of companion, and all I did was bring him and Jocelyn together to get on with their real business.'

He frowned. 'What business?'

Toni sighed. 'The usual business between an extremely eligible man and a woman.

Jocelyn has everything to recommend her as a future wife.'

'Marriage?' He sounded appalled.

'Well, it's not certain yet.' Toni sincerely hoped it never would be.

Richard breathed a vicious curse. His gaze lifted and swept around the huge high-ceilinged room with all its elegant furnishings. His finely moulded mouth thinned into a grim line as his focus lowered to pick over the expensively dressed guests. 'I shouldn't have come here. I should have known better,' he muttered. Then, without another word or even a last glance at Toni, he pushed off through the crowd, driven determination in every step.

Toni stared after him. He was clearly a very intense young man. I must talk to Jocelyn about him, she thought. Then a couple of wild revellers pounced on her and carried her off to join in the dancing, and Toni postponed any more serious thinking until after the party was over.

She kept to her resolution not to look at Noah Seton again, although she was aware of when precisely he returned from the rose-

garden with Jocelyn. The atmosphere of the party somehow heightened at his re-entrance. She was also aware of those watchful dark eyes resting on her from time to time. It made her feel more vividly alive than she had ever felt in her life. What she had always needed, Toni decided, was a challenge worthy of her mettle. The party ended up being more fun than she had ever imagined.

It was only after everyone had gone and she was alone in her bedroom that Toni really began to get her mind in order and focused on what had to be done. A re-employment service was clearly indicated. She had plenty of good contacts and she could give glowing references. There was no reason why she couldn't find good jobs for every one of those twenty-seven people.

But first she would need an office. She could hardly operate from the company building once she had left it. And she couldn't use Ray's home for business calls. That wasn't fair. Retirement was retirement, and she was going to be much more considerate to Ray's needs from now on. So she had to get an office of her own.

Which brought her to money! She wondered how much it cost to rent an office in the city. And how much the initial outlay might be. Once she got her re-employment business running, she would earn commissions that should cover costs, but until then . . . money was a problem.

There was a time when Toni had had quite a lot of money in her own right, but Murray Sheldon had divested her of the inheritance from her mother. Of course, that was her own fault. She had been mad to marry him, mad to trust him. Which just went to show how blinded one could be by sexual attraction. Well, she had learnt that lesson, and at the time she hadn't cared how much it had cost her. It was worth it, just to be out of that stupid marriage.

What little she had left had somehow disappeared over the years. She was never quite sure how it went, but then she had never gone without anything she *really needed*. It was the same with her income from work. She gave it away, lent it to friends, spent it on things. She simply wasn't very good at sticking to money. It was a commodity to be used for whatever

seemed like a good idea at the time. She hadn't realised until these last few weeks just how fortunate she was to have the fall-back security of a good home where the door was always open for her. And Ray to cosset and spoil her.

It was well past time she stood on her own two feet and proved herself capable of it. Which Toni didn't doubt for a second. She would not ask Ray for a loan. She would raise the money for the office by herself. She could always hock her pearls if she had to. Or sell some of her clothes to a second-hand shop. There was always a way to do anything. And she would find it.

'Toni?' Jocelyn's voice whispered around the bedroom door. 'Are you still awake?'

'Wide awake! Come on in,' Toni promptly invited, leaning over to switch on the bedside lamp.

Jocelyn looked wonderfully ethereal in a floating white nightie and négligé. Toni herself was wearing a cotton nightshirt with a Kermit-the-frog motif, which had appealed to her sense of humour. Maybe some day some frog of a man might turn into a prince

worth sharing her bed and life with. It was a fantasy that Toni had extreme doubts about, but she was not one to give up on dreams. Not entirely anyway.

Toni thought again how very beautiful her stepsister was. However, the smile on Jocelyn's face seemed a trifle over-bright for this time of night—or late pre-dawn, to be more exact.

'I wanted to ask what you thought of Noah now you've met him?' she asked, relaxing across the end of the bed as Toni hitched herself up on the pillows.

'About the same as before I met him,' Toni answered drily. 'But he's certainly a macho hunk of a man, if that's what you want to be told.'

Jocelyn gave a laugh that sounded a bit tinny. 'He's total man all right. He goes after what he wants. Which is more than can be said for some.' Her eyes flickered with uncertainty. 'He asked a lot of questions about you, Toni.'

'Just doing his homework on a prickly sister-in-law. And don't answer any more questions on anything. The less he knows, the

better.' Toni threw her a teasing grin to settle any doubts Jocelyn might have in her mind about that meeting in the rose-garden.

'He said you had a talk about the take-over and he's going to look into the problems you raised.' Jocelyn was obviously prompting for more.

'Yes. I did some spadework. Hopefully something might come of it,' Toni answered blandly. 'He must think a lot of you, Jocelyn. I doubt he'd bother otherwise.'

'Oh, I don't know,' Jocelyn sighed, and plucked discontentedly at the bedcover. 'I'm not really sure what he thinks of me. He's very nice...very mature and sure of himself...gentlemanly...but sometimes I think he's too smart. He seems to read my mind...know what I am...what I want to do. I get the feeling he'll take over my life. And I'm not sure I want that.' Her lovely mouth tilted into a lop-sided smile. 'Am I crazy, Toni?'

'It's your life, Jocelyn. You've got to decide what you want,' Toni answered quietly, wanting to press against the man, but knowing she had no right to interfere.

Jocelyn brooded for several moments. 'I guess I'm crazy. I'd have to be to let him get away.'

'Have you gone to bed with him, Jocelyn?'

The blunt question earned a reproving look. Jocelyn was very private about sexual matters. Toni wondered if she was still a virgin, although she was only a year younger than herself. When no answer was readily forthcoming she shrugged and offered an appeasing smile.

'Well, it's one way of getting to know what you want or don't want. It didn't work for me. But it's the usual thing when two people are thinking of getting married.'

Jocelyn relented. 'One of the things I like about Noah is that he's not all over me like a rash! Not like other men. He's restrained. And what he does, he does . . . with real sensitivity.' A self-conscious blush stained her cheeks. 'I don't have to go to bed with him to know he'll be a good lover, Toni. He's not pressing me. I like that too!'

'Fine! It just sounds a bit cold-blooded to me,' Toni remarked flippantly, unaccountably disturbed by the idea of Noah

Seton's being at all sensitive. 'What makes you so sure he's thinking of marriage?'

'The kind of things he talks about. I know he's serious, Toni.'

Toni thought that what was to happen on Monday and thereafter would be a good gauge of how serious Noah Seton was about her stepsister, but she couldn't tell Jocelyn that. At least, if he changed his mind, she didn't think Jocelyn would be too heart-broken. As she pondered the comments her stepsister had made, another thought slipped into Toni's mind.

'How well do you know that Richard what's-his-name who was in the rose-garden with you?' she asked curiously.

Jocelyn's face went oddly still. 'Richard Gilbert? He's a doctor at Camperdown Hospital. We're just friends. Why do you ask?'

'I think he fancies you. He was mad as a hatter when I hauled him back to the party with me.'

'I didn't hear him protesting at the time,' Jocelyn remarked with a decidedly waspish note in her voice.

'Well, I can tell you one thing. He sure didn't fancy me for doing it. And when I explained that you had a thing going with Noah Seton he wasn't too pleased about that either. You'd better be kind to him, Jocelyn. He's obviously carrying some kind of torch for you.'

A surprisingly catlike little smile played about Jocelyn's mouth. 'He's only ever been friendly towards me.'

'Well, think again,' Toni advised. 'He was fairly burning tonight. And not with good humour.'

'He's very good with children,' Jocelyn said, warmth turning her eyes golden.

'That's nice,' Toni encouraged.

'Yes,' Jocelyn agreed. Still smiling to herself, she gracefully lifted herself off the bed and wafted towards the door. 'Thanks for making the party go so well, Toni,' she said liltingly. 'Goodnight.'

'Sweet dreams,' Toni returned.

A satisfied smile curved her own lips as she snapped off the light and settled back down on the pillows. If Jocelyn secretly fancied

Richard Gilbert, and the young doctor had enough gumption to declare his feelings...

Obviously Jocelyn had been obtuse in her dealings with him. The good doctor had to be actively encouraged. Anything that put a spanner in Noah Seton's works was only to the good. It would be a chastening and beneficial experience for him to find out he couldn't have any woman he chose.

Toni put that item on her mental list of things to be acted on. Which brought her back to Noah Seton.

Human relationships were the very devil! And, on a purely pragmatic level, Toni couldn't deny that Noah Seton had a lot going for him...tall, dark and handsome, as wealthy as Croesus, charm on tap when he chose to use it, and a *sensitive* lover as well!

Toni couldn't help wondering how good he was in that department. It was certainly a temptation. For some reason—which she didn't stop to analyse—she felt relieved that he hadn't taken Jocelyn to bed. No commitment...as yet. That was what he had said.

He probably made love like a computer, she thought scornfully. All expertise and no



sailing on Sydney Harbour, or surfing at one of the many beaches that graced the city coastline, or boating down the Hawkesbury River, water-skiing, wind-surfing... The temptations danced through Toni's mind as she leaned on her bedroom window-sill and breathed in the marvellous morning.

But there were other people with only gloom ahead of them, and today was the day to start shouldering responsibilities. There was no putting it off. That would only make a mockery of her resolution. An office had to be found and rented. There was business to organise. Today could not be a day of pleasure and rest. That alone would constitute some proof to Noah Seton how serious she was.

Toni dragged herself away from the window and went downstairs for Sunday brunch. The cleaning contractors had already been and gone; the house was restored to its usual pristine state. Jocelyn was apparently not up yet. The live-in housekeeper, Mrs Frobisher, was pouring Ray some coffee as he sat at the breakfast-table with the Sunday newspapers spread out in front of him. Toni greeted both

phone amid all of this shrubbery and call a taxi.' She started to look around, expecting Luke to try and cajole her into staying with one of his flights of fancy. Instead he snarled back at her in a voice she had never heard before.

'Stand still a minute so I can talk to you,' he ordered. When Theresa had turned to face him, he glared at her, his dark brows almost meeting above his long, straight nose, his face so bleak that she scarcely recognised him. 'You can think what you like, Theresa,' he said, 'but I did think there were two bedrooms here, and I had no idea that the one there is would be... like it is. Perhaps what Harry said was that the bed was big enough for two rooms. He was pretty potted when we talked about it. However, I had no intention of leading you into temptation. You are doing that yourself, my dear, imagining things that just aren't so, just as you did five years ago. I had hoped you would have gained a little perspective by now, but apparently you are still too naïve to know that the world is not painted in black and white. You're still afraid

to look at anything positive, when the negative is so much easier and safer. I'm very sorry about that. You'll never know how sorry.' He pointed toward a small table in front of the french windows. 'There's the telephone.' With that, he wheeled around and walked into the bedroom, banging the door behind him.

Theresa stared after him, a huge lump forming in her throat. She had never seen Luke really angry before, not even when she had been so angry with him that day five years ago. Now he did not want her to stay, and she doubted he would do anything to protect himself from the Morton twins. Feeling almost sick, tears starting to trickle down her cheeks, she went to the telephone, found the number of a taxi company in the directory, and made her call. She picked up her suitcase, started toward the front door, then looked towards the bedroom door. She went to it, raised her hand to knock, and then lowered it again. What could she say? Nothing that would help. She couldn't stay here now. Si-

lently, she went to the front door again and slipped quietly outside.

'Goodbye, Luke,' she whispered, and closed the door behind her.



CHAPTER THREE

THERESA sailed upwards in the glass-enclosed elevator in the towering atrium at the Hyatt, feeling numb from the effort it had taken to keep from bursting into tears while she registered and got her key. No sooner was she in her room than she let out a strangled sob and flung herself on to her bed. What had she done? Why had she done it? Where had she gone wrong? Images of Luke's face, hard and cold and angry, kept rising before her closed eyes. Try as she might, she could not turn it into his usual warm, smiling expression.

'I can't bear it,' she sobbed aloud. 'I can't bear to have him hate me.' It was no use recalling the hurt of years ago or remembering the suspicions that might never go away. Fool that she was, she would give anything now for one warm smile that would wipe away that terrible image of cold, bleak anger that had pierced her heart like a shaft of icy steel. Or

did he truly hate her now? What had he been trying to tell her? Usually, he led her into things, like an artist, painting a picture with words. This time he had left her on her own to discover what he meant. The part about seeing things in black and white was fairly obvious, or at least it seemed so. He was saying that her standards for what was right and wrong were too rigid, that she didn't allow for any extenuating circumstances. She saw him only as a mirror of her father, not as a very different man with a very different life. As a result, she had jumped to an unfair conclusion. And, if what he said about what he had believed to be true about the bedrooms was true, then she had.

'Oh, why am I so stupid?' she moaned, pushing herself to a sitting position and pulling half a dozen Kleenex from the box by her bed to mop her tears. No wonder Luke thought she had no perspective. He hadn't taken advantage of her five years ago when he could easily have done so, and he wouldn't now. He wasn't that kind of a man. She should have learned that by now, by being out

in the world and meeting other men. Instead, she had kept him categorised as an evil man who had taken advantage of her youth and inexperience, afraid to take a second look and see him for what he was. He was so... so very special. He wasn't like any other man she'd ever met. He was more fun to be with than anyone else on earth. There hadn't been a day in the past five years that she hadn't thought of something they had shared, some funny, fanciful, imaginative trick with which he had teased her own imagination and intelligence into flower. And she had pretended to herself that she hated him—the easier negative.

'I don't hate him,' she said softly, 'I never really did.' But had she really loved him? It had been so intense that one, brief month. *Maybe* she had loved him. *Maybe* she still did, she wasn't sure. No one else had ever made her feel the way he did. He must feel something for her, too; he had been so angry. *Maybe* that was the reason he had said he was sorry that she had no perspective. *Maybe* that was why he had stayed away from her for so long. He thought she was a hopeless case.

Now, seeing her again, he still liked her and thought *maybe* she had changed. There were so many 'maybes'. Too many. She had to sort them out, find out what she...and Luke...really felt. If she could. He had said she would never know how sorry he was. Did he really mean never? Had he truly written her off now as hopeless? Well, he was wrong about that if he had. She might be a slow learner, but she wasn't hopeless. She was catching on a lot faster now, while he hadn't yet seemed to understand the danger he was in.

The thought of that problem brought another convulsive sob from Theresa's throat, but she dashed away her tears with an impatient hand. She didn't have time to cry any longer. She would die if anything happened to Luke because of her stupidity. It was time to call Quentin and see what advice he could give her. Then she'd decide what to do.

'Do you know anything about a short, fat pair of twins named Wilber and William Morton?' she asked as soon as she had her brother on the phone.

'Wilber and William Morton,' her brother repeated in his slow, methodical voice. 'That's one of the Brimstone brothers' aliases. They're a couple of minor-league racketeers. Last I heard they were in Joliet prison, but they may be out by now. Why?'

'Did you ever hear of them doing any...any hired killings?'

'No. Why?'

Theresa explained what she had heard on the train, and her subsequent attempts to convince Luke he was in danger.

'I suppose it's possible that the Brimstones have decided to move up in the underworld,' Quentin replied, 'but I can't imagine Scarcelli hiring that pair. He has his own troops that are a lot more professional than they are. But still, it isn't something to take lightly. What's the matter with Thorndike? I remember you said he was kind of crazy. He can be kind of dead if he isn't careful.'

'He isn't crazy, he's just...imaginative,' Theresa said. 'I like him. Meeting him again, I've discovered...well, never mind. I'll tell

you later. What shall I do? Contact the local authorities?'

'You can. They can pick the Brimstones up for questioning, but they probably have stories prepared as to why they're in New Orleans and they'll just deny having made any threats. What effect it will have for them to know someone knows why they're really in town is a good question. They might panic and do something in a hurry. They're not the smartest pair in the world. Or they might disappear for a while and come back when they think they've been forgotten, which means Thorndike would have to be on his guard for God knows how long.'

'That sounds like it would be better if they didn't know we're on to them,' Theresa said. 'Any suggestions as to how I can get them to do something non-fatal and get them locked up again?'

'What do you mean, you?' Quentin asked sharply. 'Has Thorndike hired you to protect him? You're not equipped for that kind of a job.'

'No, he hasn't hired me. I just don't want anything to happen to him,' Theresa replied. 'And don't tell me I'm not equipped, or try to play big brother and forbid me to do it, because I'm going to do it anyway.'

Quentin growled something about stubborn sisters, then said pointedly, 'Unless I'm mistaken, you have another case to work on. You do have a responsibility to Mrs McDonald, you know.'

'Don't worry, I'll take care of that, too. How about answering my first question?'

'There's not much you can do unless they make a move. Then it's all apt to happen pretty fast. The best thing would be for Thorndike to pay Scarcelli what he owes him and get him to call off his hit, if that's what it really is about. Somehow, that still doesn't sound quite right to me. Do you want me to see what I can find out?'

'Yes, please do,' Theresa replied. 'Meanwhile, I guess I'll just have to play it by ear. By the way, I'm going to be staying with Luke. I'll let you know the phone number tomorrow.'

'You're going to *what*?'

'You heard me. 'Bye, Quent.'

Theresa dropped the receiver on to its cradle, grabbed her suitcase, and went out of the door. She hadn't consciously decided to go back to Luke's, but as she talked to Quentin she knew there was no other choice. If Luke wouldn't let her in ... well, she would cross that bridge when she got to it. In a few minutes she had checked out and the doorman had got her a taxi.

'Take me somewhere where I can get a folding bed,' she told the driver. 'You know, the kind with a little foam cushion that people lie out in the sun on. I'm staying with a friend and I don't want to have to sleep on the sofa. It's expensive and lumpy.'

'Sure, I can do that. I think the discount store has them on sale,' the driver replied. He grinned at Theresa in the rear-view mirror. 'Nice guest. I wish my mother-in-law was that thoughtful. She takes my bed.'

'I wouldn't do that,' Theresa replied. Wild horses couldn't get her to sleep in that even wilder bedroom. She was going to try to get

over being so uptight, try not to be suspicious of Luke's intentions, but that was going a bit far. Even five years ago, before she knew Luke was married and when her desire for him was almost boundless, she would have run like a deer if he'd led her into a room like that one.

An hour later, the taxi deposited Theresa in front of Luke's apartment. After three stops, she had found what she wanted. The bed was small and light, folded easily, and had a little carrying handle at the top. She stood on the doorstep, clutching her bag in one hand and the bed in the other, suddenly immobilised with fear. Would Luke let her in? What if he had gone out? It was almost dinner time. Finally she set the bed down, banged on the door, and then picked the bed up again. If she had to, she'd knock him down to get inside. Finally, after a second loud knock at the door, Luke answered. Theresa could only stare at him, shocked. He looked tired and haggard, his face drawn and tense. His eyes were red, as if he, too, had been crying. He blinked several times, and gradually his face relaxed into softer lines. After what seemed to

Theresa like an eternity, during which her stomach tied itself into an impossible knot, he looked down at the bed she was carrying.

'I don't think I'm buying any of those, ma'am,' he said huskily.

The knot in Theresa's stomach magically untied itself and her knees went weak with relief. Luke didn't hate her, after all.

'I'm giving this one away, sir,' she said. 'I come with it.'

'Well, in that case...' he flung the door wide and bowed gallantly, 'do come in, pretty lady.'

Theresa entered and set down her burdens. 'I thought maybe... *Gesundheit!*' as Luke sneezed violently. 'I thought maybe we could rearrange some plants to sort of wall off part of this room for my bed,' she said, voicing an idea which had come to her as she and the taxi driver had talked. *'Gesundheit!'* as Luke sneezed again.

'I'm allergic to cats,' he explained, blowing his nose, 'and I don't seem to have brought my antihistamine. I was about to go out and get some before my eyes swell shut. Lucky you

caught me before I left. After that I was going to go and drown my sorrows for a few hours just like those stupid Earthlings do. Glad you saved me from that. I would have felt even worse tomorrow.'

He smiled, and Theresa realised that he was trying to tell her, obliquely, that he had been sorry she left and was glad she was back. Thank goodness he hadn't been crying his eyes out, as she had first feared. She wouldn't know what to make of that if he had, whether it meant he cared a great deal about her or was really terrified by the threat on his life.

'So am I,' she agreed. 'I have some antihistamines in my suitcase, too, so you're really in luck.' She perched her suitcase on a pile of cushions, opened it, and handed him the bottle. 'I talked to my brother,' she went on. 'He says the Mortons are for real. Their real name is Brimstone, and they're known as minor-league criminals, not killers so far. He says their threat should be taken seriously, anyway, but he seemed to think Scarcelli would have used one of his own men. Is there anyone else you can think of who might have

hired them? Anyone in Chicago, for instance?' While she had been talking, she had followed Luke into the kitchen, where he downed a pill with some water and then splashed cold water on his face.

'Lord, my eyes itch,' he said, towelling his face dry. 'No, Terry, love, I don't know anyone else, but that doesn't mean there isn't someone. Success breeds enemies. Maybe there's some poor benighted soul out there who thinks I stole his plot and got famous while he's labouring in obscurity in a nuts and bolts factory. He's been saving up for years just so he could hire old fire and Brimstone to come after me.'

'I guess it's some comfort that they aren't experienced killers,' Theresa said with a sigh.

'Unless they decide to shoot me across a crowded room and hit two or three innocent bystanders instead,' Luke said drily. Then he chuckled. 'Remember that old song?' He began to sing. 'Some enchanted evening, you will see a hit man . . .'

'Stop that!' Theresa said, then burst into helpless giggles as Luke continued his parody.

'That,' she scolded when he was through, 'was worse than having to listen to Nero fiddle while Rome burned. Quentin wanted to know if you were crazy when I told him you didn't take the Brimstones' threat seriously.'

'And what did you tell him?' Luke asked, suddenly serious.

'Never you mind,' Theresa replied, wrinkling her nose at him. Then, seeing that Luke looked really concerned, she added, 'Of course I don't think you're crazy. I told him you were imaginative.'

'Which sometimes looks very much the same,' Luke said. 'I know. I guess laughing is my way of dealing with tension. I'd a hell of a lot rather die laughing than any other way, given that I'd rather not die at all, ever. Wouldn't you?'

Theresa looked into Luke's eyes, which were searching hers so seriously now. He had such a remarkable way of switching from humour to seriousness in a flash. It was like being on a roller-coaster: exhilarating, and yet sometimes frightening. If you didn't stay with him, you were lost.

'Yes,' she answered his question. 'But I don't think I'm as good at it as you are.'

'You'll learn,' Luke said. He laid his hand on her cheek, and his eyes drifted to her lips.

Theresa held very still, afraid to move lest she send some signal that she did not intend, especially since she was trembling inside from the inner conflict that set in as soon as he touched her. She wanted him to kiss her, and yet she was still afraid. Afraid of the surging emotions that might overwhelm her ability to think. She needed to be able to think clearly as long as Luke's life was in danger, and after that to be able to decide if she dared to love him, with all that might imply.

Then, suddenly, he withdrew his hand, closed his eyes, and shook his head. 'No,' he said, as if to himself. Then he opened his eyes and looked at Theresa again. 'I promised myself not to touch you if you came back. I don't want to frighten you away again. I apologise for being so abrupt before. It was just that...' He broke off and made a wry face.

'That's OK,' Theresa said quickly, putting her hand on his arm. 'I understand.'

'Maybe,' Luke said. 'Maybe you do.' Then he shook off his serious mood with a broad grin. 'Right now, see if you can understand why I have a sudden uncontrollable yen for a dozen oysters on the half-shell.'

'You're pregnant?' Theresa suggested, delighted when Luke roared with laughter.

'Not this month,' he joked back. 'I'm sure of it. No, I get this feeling every now and then. I think it has something to do with the way the phase of the moon relates to my home planet. Let us stroll out into the Quarter and find a café with plenty of oysters before I go berserk.'

'Don't forget to keep an eye out for the Brimstone brothers,' Theresa reminded him as they went out the door. 'You're taller and can see a lot better in a crowd than I can.'

'Is that a fact?' Luke said, pretending to be very surprised. 'I always thought you short people made up for it by being able to see through people.'

'Don't I wish?' Theresa replied with a sigh. She wished she could even figuratively see through Luke, so that she could tell just how concerned he really was. She was beginning to feel strongly that he was a lot more worried than he let on. She was less sure of it when, as they began elbowing their way through the inevitable crowd on Bourbon Street, he suddenly took a tight hold on her arm.

'I just saw Dee and Dum,' he said. 'They went into a show that advertises "Fifteen Lovelies Bare It All In Sensuous, Exotic Dances". Shall we follow them and see if it's something their mother would approve of?'

Theresa gave him a disgusted look. 'No. Pretend I'm your mother. I don't let my boys go into shows like that until they're over forty.' Then she suddenly remembered Toby McDonald. 'Darn!' she said, stopping in the middle of the street.

'What's the matter?' Luke asked.

'The man I'm looking for. Toby McDonald. His lady love is supposedly an exotic dancer named Carmelita. We'll probably have to go into that place and see if they know her. [illegible]

not now!' she added as Luke's eyebrows shot up and he pretended great delight at her announcement. 'Oysters now,' she said firmly.

'Oysters now, dancers later. Sounds good to me,' Luke said. 'Come on.' He took Theresa's arm and propelled her rapidly down Bourbon Street. 'We'll window shop on the way back,' he said, as she dragged on his arm to point out a display of Mardi Gras masks. 'Let's eat while we know where the boys are.'

So he is worried, Theresa thought, reversing her opinion again and hurrying along at his side. She had better stop letting his bravado deceive her.

They turned down Iberville, and soon were entering a brightly lit restaurant where, at a long counter, oyster shuckers were hard at work trying to keep up with the demand, while a crowd milled about, drinking beer and waiting for vacant tables.

'I hope we don't have to wait too long,' Theresa remarked, after Luke had given his name to the head waiter and brought them each a cold beer.

Luke shrugged. 'I'm not worried. Being close to so many oysters makes me feel secure.' Seeing Theresa's anxious expression, he smiled. 'Let's not think about the Brimstones for a while. If I devote much of my mental power to thinking about that pair it will take all of the pleasure out of life and I might as well be dead.'

'All right,' Theresa agreed. 'I've noticed that there are several ladies in here who look as if they'd love to bring some pleasure into your life. There's a blonde over by the wall who hasn't taken her eyes off of you since we came in.' In fact, she mused, being trained to observe such things was not terribly helpful at times. It had taken her only a few seconds to notice that most of the women in the restaurant zeroed in on Luke's handsome face, some of them gawking unashamedly.

'You can't be jealous,' Luke said, his eyebrows raised in exaggerated shock.

'Of course not,' Theresa denied quickly. 'I automatically observe which people react to which other people. You can sometimes discover connections you didn't know about just

by watching people's eyes in a crowd. The way she was staring, I wondered if you knew her, or she knew who you are.' And I was wondering how far I could throw her, she added grimly to herself. If that was being jealous, she certainly was, but she was definitely not going to admit it to Luke, even if she had to break their old rule about always telling the truth. Not that she thought they were still playing by those rules, the way Luke was dodging around admitting to his fear of the Brimstones.

Luke flicked a glance toward the blonde, then looked back at Theresa, one eyebrow cocked mischievously. 'Not bad,' he said. 'It's a good thing you're not jealous. I don't know her, but I wouldn't mind meeting her.' He burst out laughing as Theresa glared at him. 'Terry, love, you're turning green. It's not your best colour. Besides, with all of that green in the apartment, I don't think I can stand it.'

'You're imagining things,' Theresa replied tightly. 'I'm simply trying to do my job.'

'Of course,' Luke said, nodding seriously. 'And I'm trying to do mine.'

Theresa frowned. 'What job is that? Annoying me?'

'No, Theresa,' Luke said with a sigh. 'That isn't it. But I guess I should look on the bright side. When you figure that out, my job will be finished.'

'Are you trying to tell me I'm dense?' Theresa demanded, perplexed. Luke's statement made no sense at all to her.

'I don't think dense is quite the word,' he replied. 'Although a kind of apparent denseness can be the result. Ah, our table is ready. Oysters, here I come.'

Although Theresa tried several times during their dinner of oysters, followed by blackened redfish, to get Luke to tell her what the right word would be, he flatly refused, leaving her more confused than ever.

'I already gave you the word, or words, earlier today,' he said. 'You'll have to figure it out for yourself. If I tell you, you'll only deny it.'

That, Theresa thought, was not much help. Luke had inundated her with words. 'Have fun being cryptic,' she said crossly. 'It will probably take me years to unravel what you're driving at.'

'I don't think so,' Luke said. He reached across the table and took hold of Theresa's hand. 'Don't fret about it,' he said gently. 'I think it will come to you suddenly, quite soon. It's that sort of a thing.'

Theresa looked into the warmth of Luke's beautiful, dark eyes, and then down at his hand, enclosing hers. If he meant that his job was to get her to admit to herself that she cared enough about him to be jealous, that job was already done. If he meant that he wanted her to admit it to him, that was something else again, something that might take quite a long time. She would have to be sure she could trust him first, if she ever could. Making jokes about meeting blondes was not very conducive to that kind of trust... especially when she wasn't sure they were jokes.

'Dessert?' suggested the waiter, appearing by their table. 'Cheesecake? Pecan pie?'

'Pecan pie, by all means,' Luke replied instantly.

The waiter looked questioningly at Theresa.

'Oh, I couldn't...' she began, biting her lip. There was nothing she liked better than pecan pie, one of the south's most famous and calorie-laden temptations.

'Yes, she could,' Luke said. 'Two pecan pies.' He grinned at Theresa's scowl. 'Don't let the Earthlings trap you into their bad habits. Perpetual self-denial is deadly, not virtuous. Here we are, enjoying one of the few things they occasionally do really well, producing excellent food. Take advantage of it. One piece of pecan pie won't do any harm. It will only put two ounces on those skinny bones of yours.'

Theresa sighed. She had known being with Luke would not be easy. 'It's not just tonight's pecan pie I'm worried about,' she grumbled. 'It's tomorrow's and the day after that's. I can't really enjoy something that's so fattening.'

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'Theresa, that's pitiful!' Luke exclaimed. 'If I thought that was really true, I'd get up and leave this instant.' Then he snapped his fingers and shook his head. 'No, I know it isn't true, and I can't leave. I have my job to do.'

'That job again! First you get me confused. Now you're trying to make me fat. Fat and confused. Is that the way you want me to be? I'm afraid I won't be able to save you from the Brimstone brothers in that condition.'

'Theresa,' Luke said seriously, leaning toward her and peering intently into her eyes, 'I am trying to save you from something far worse than the Brimstone brothers.' His eyes suddenly sparkled with mirth. 'Just doing my job, ma'am,' he said.

'If you don't stop talking about some mysterious job you're doing to or for me, I'm going to throw my pecan pie at you,' Theresa warned. 'I am perfectly happy the way I am. I don't need rearranging.'

Luke leaned back again and lifted one eyebrow. 'Perfectly happy?' he said. 'Really?'

'Yes, really!' Theresa snapped. She glowered at the piece of pie which the waiter now set before her. She ought to show that arrogant Luke Thorndike. She should just let the pie sit there. But...her mouth watered, and she picked up her fork. Maybe one bite. The first taste told her that one bite was impossible. It was heavenly. She slowly ate the pie, afraid to look at Luke and see his triumphant, I-told-you-so expression. She was downing the very last crumb, when she felt a prickling sensation at the nape of her neck. Something was wrong. She raised her head slowly, her face carefully blank. Then she smiled brightly at Luke and leaned towards him as if he had her undivided attention.

'Don't look now,' she said, 'but our mutual friends have arrived. They're taking a table between us and the door. One of them just noticed you, and now they're both looking this way. It was nice of you to tell them about this place.'

'What do we do now?' Luke asked, leaning toward her. 'Do we leap out the window and run like the devil? Is it time for the chase

scene? I'll bet those fat fellows can't keep up with us. Can't you picture them huffing and puffing along like the two engines that couldn't, their arms pumping like pistons, getting so hot that smoke pours out of their ears?'

'Oh, Luke, do be serious,' Theresa said, laughing helplessly at the image he had created. 'No, it isn't time for the chase scene. I hope it never is. The thing for us to do is leave calmly, as if nothing were wrong. Then we'll have to keep a sharp eye out to see if they stay for dinner, or start to follow us. If they follow, we'll have to try to get home without ending up in any dark, quiet place where we're alone.'

'That shouldn't be difficult, given the crowds,' Luke said, 'except for the last block before the apartment. Shall we stop and say hello on our way out?'

'If you feel up to it,' Theresa replied. 'I wouldn't mind getting a close look at them to see if I can tell if they're armed.'

'Oh, they have arms all right,' Luke said quickly. 'I shook hands with them. Remember?'

'Ha, ha,' Theresa said, making a face. 'Shall we go?'

'If that's the best laugh I can get, we might as well,' Luke said. 'We'll stop and say hello. Don't want to appear unfriendly.'

Luke greeted the Brimstones jovially, recommended the oysters and redfish, and then bent to whisper something in William's ear which made him look first startled and then burst into hearty laughter.

'What did you tell him?' Theresa demanded, once they were outside.

'A little joke I know about exotic dancers,' Luke replied with a grin. 'Made quite a hit, didn't it? Also lets them know how easy they are for me to spot. I thought that might be a good idea.'

'So they can be more careful in the future?' Theresa asked sarcastically. 'It might interest you to know that either Wilber has an extra roll of fat, or he's got a shoulder holster on.

I suggest we get back to your apartment as quickly as possible.'

'They won't try anything in this crowd,' Luke said, as they once again turned down Bourbon Street. 'Besides, they may not be following us.'

He strolled along at what, to Theresa, was an aggravatingly slow pace. Then, to her consternation, he stopped to watch a juggler performing on a street corner.

'Luke,' she said, tugging at his sleeve, 'we ought to keep moving.' He ignored her. When she tugged again, he looked down.

'Have you ever wondered,' he asked seriously, 'what it would be like if everyone could do everything well? If we could all juggle, or do magic, or play the trumpet? Would anyone watch?' He returned his attention to the juggler, applauding enthusiastically when the young man managed to keep five oranges in the air with his hands, and a plate spinning on his head at the same time.

Theresa, instead, watched Luke. He was watching the young juggler intently, his mouth curved in an admiring smile, as if it

were the most wonderful sight he had ever seen. Theresa sighed. Luke wasn't stupid or foolish, he was simply entranced by life. And she, she thought, as a warm but anxious feeling invaded her heart, was entranced by him. It was a dangerous situation, for both of them. If only she were tall enough to see over the crowd, to see if the Brimstone brothers were on their trail, she would feel a little better. She took hold of Luke's arm and squeezed it hard. He looked at her again, eyebrows raised questioningly.

'Would you mind taking a look around for the twins?' she asked.

'That's better,' Luke said, his eyes twinkling mischievously. He turned around, looking in all directions, then bent so that his face was level with Theresa's. 'You really can't see much from down here, can you?' he commented.

'No,' Theresa said, frowning. 'What did you mean by "that's better"?'

'I told you that I didn't want you playing mother hen, and I meant it. You may ask me to be careful, but don't start ordering me

around or pulling on me. Understood?' His eyes searched Theresa's from only inches away.

'Yes, Luke,' Theresa said with a sigh. As if it wasn't difficult enough to try to protect him, without him being stubborn! 'Did you see anything when you were up in the clouds?'

'No,' he replied. 'We seem to be alone with only a few thousand other friendly people.' He suddenly leaned forward and kissed Theresa's lips, holding his lips against hers for several seconds. Then he pulled back, shaking his head and smiling ruefully. 'I don't know what made me do that. It must have been the oysters. I hope you're not offended.'

'Offended?' Theresa said weakly. It felt as if a lightning bolt had grazed her lips, leaving her scarred and shaken as a tree on a hilltop. She tried to get her mind to work, but it seemed all scrambled. Had it felt like that before, when he'd kissed her? She couldn't remember it being quite like that. Maybe it was only because she was nervous about the Brimstones. She should be nervous about that. So should Luke. But she didn't feel

nervous, only excited. [illegible]
standing here for too long [illegible]
even if Luke hadn't seen [illegible]
moment she didn't seem [illegible]
partially roused herself [illegible]
think...that is, would you [illegible]

She floundered to a stop [illegible]
face was still so close [illegible]
to move a few inches [illegible]
find out if the lightning [illegible]
lips were so soft and [illegible]
so beautiful and glowing [illegible]
seemed responsible [illegible]
swayed forwards [illegible]
his.

'Oh!' she said [illegible]
little, her eyes still open [illegible]
pened again! She closed [illegible]
forwards a second [illegible]
Luke's arms close [illegible]
locked in an embrace [illegible]
her mouth opening [illegible]
Luke's tongue, [illegible]
milling crowd [illegible]
continuing applause [illegible]

juggler and where they were. This was insane! She had forgotten all about the Brimstones!

With a quick move she pushed herself free and looked around her, only to see a circle of people around them, smiling and applauding. Her cheeks flaming, she stared up at Luke. He grinned down at her, his eyes alight with devilish mischief.

'They seem to think we do that quite well,' he said, giving a little bow to the crowd, who applauded again. 'Shall we do it again down the street a ways? We might develop quite a following.'

'Certainly not!' Theresa said, scowling. 'I take back what I said earlier. You are definitely crazy!' She turned and marched stiffly away down the street. If Luke wanted to follow her, fine. If he didn't, it was just too bad. She couldn't possibly protect a man who had no more common sense than a gnat! He was absolutely infuriating. Of course, she had kissed him back, but he was the one who had started it. And if he hadn't grabbed her like that...

A rough-looking man bumped into Theresa and pushed by her. She felt a tug on the strap of her shoulder-bag. That did it! All she needed now was to be robbed! She ducked, whirled, and lifted as smoothly as a textbook manoeuvre. Then she turned and let out a horrified gasp, her eyes glued open in unblinking agony. It was not some ugly stranger, it was Luke flying through the air. He landed on the pavement with a thud, and then lay there, perfectly still.

'Boy, lady, you don't fool around,' said a teenage boy, grinning at her admiringly.

'Oh, shut up and call an ambulance!' Theresa cried, dropping to her knees beside Luke. She put her hand on his forehead and brushed his hair back, tears pouring down her cheeks. 'Luke, speak to me. Please, Luke. *Please*. Say something.'

CHAPTER FOUR

LUKE opened his eyes and slowly focused them on Theresa's face. 'Does it have to be brilliant?' he asked. He pushed himself to a sitting position and rubbed his head. 'I guess I'm all here.'

'Oh, Luke, I'm so sorry,' Theresa sobbed. 'I thought you were stealing my bag. I mean, I thought someone was. I didn't know it was you.'

'So I deduced, somewhere in mid-air,' Luke said drily, 'when I realised you couldn't have known it was me.'

The teenage boy reappeared with a policeman in tow. 'What's going on here?' demanded the policeman.

'He tried to steal her bag,' the boy said, pointing at Luke.

Theresa got to her feet. 'No, he didn't,' she said. 'It was a mistake. He's a friend of mine. But this big, rough-looking man had just

bumped into me and I thought...Luke, be careful,' she said, taking his hand as he struggled to his feet.

'I'm all right,' Luke said gruffly, scowling at Theresa and brushing at his clothing. 'Don't fuss.'

Men! How they hated to admit they were hurt, Theresa thought. The policeman was frowning at her, too.

'You ought to be more careful if you're that good at self-defence,' he said. 'You could really hurt someone.'

'I know,' Theresa said, feeling suddenly very small and stupid. 'I've never done anything like that before.'

'Could I see some identification?' the policeman asked. He gave her a lop-sided smile. 'I like to keep track of all of the lethal weapons in the Quarter.'

'Of course.' Theresa felt for her bag. It was not hanging from her shoulder! 'It's gone! Now it's really gone,' she said, looking frantically around on the street where Luke had fallen. 'It must have happened when I was kneeling beside you,' she said to Luke. 'I was

so worried, I didn't even notice.' Tears of anger welled in her eyes, making her more miserable than ever. 'This is awful!' she said, stamping her foot in frustration. 'This is turning into a nightmare!'

'Calm down, Terry, love,' Luke said softly, putting his arm around her shoulders. 'Nothing irreparable has happened.' He pulled his wallet from inside his shirt and handed it to the officer. 'I'm Luke Thorndike,' he said, 'and this is Theresa Long. I've known her for many years, and I'll vouch for the fact that she is, generally, an upstanding citizen.'

'You from California, too?' the policeman asked Theresa as he handed Luke's identification back.

'No, Chicago,' she replied. 'I work for my brother's detective agency, which is how I happen to know self-defence.'

The policemen persisted with his questions until he had found out why Theresa was in town and where she was staying.

'At least I know she'll be safe,' he commented, winking broadly at Luke. 'Well, if

your bag shows up, we'll call, and if I turn up anything on McDonald, I'll let you know.' He gave Theresa a friendly salute and walked away.

Theresa looked up at Luke and grimaced wryly. 'I don't blame you if you're mad at me,' she said. 'I'm mad at myself. I'm so stupid, it's pitiful. I probably deserve to lose my bag. I knew I shouldn't have splurged on a Gucci. How does your head feel? Are you hurt anywhere else?'

Luke chuckled. 'Terry, love,' he said, 'my head doesn't ache, so I think all I'll have is a bump for a day or two. Everything else is fine, and I'm not angry with you. This has been one of the most memorable evenings I've ever spent. Maybe the most memorable. But I think it's time to call it a night. Shall we head for home before any more excitement breaks out? Or shall we hang around and see if we can get the Brimstones to follow us?'

'Good lord, no,' Theresa said with feeling. 'Let's get out of here.' She was more than glad to have Luke tuck his arm around her as they started down the street. Somehow, she felt

that she needed protection as much as he did, most likely from herself. They had gone only a short distance when she stopped. At Luke's questioning look she said, 'That's funny. I thought I heard someone calling my name.'

Luke turned his head and listened intently. Then he turned around to look.

'For God's sake,' he said, a grin spreading across his face, 'look what's coming. Two Boy Scouts doing their good deed for the day.'

Theresa stood on tiptoe. 'Oh, my goodness!' she said. 'I don't believe this.'

Coming toward them at a trot, looking for all the world like round, puffing engines, came the Brimstone brothers. Wilber, in the lead, was clutching Theresa's bag.

'Miss Long,' he panted, 'thank goodness we found you! Hello, Thorndike.' He held the bag out to Theresa. 'We saw this fellow duck into a doorway about two blocks back with this bag in his hands. William said it looked like yours. It's a real Gucci, isn't it? I thought so. Anyway we—er—pursuaded the fellow to hand it over, and we checked the identification. Sure glad we got it back for you.'

'So am I,' Theresa said, her eyes still wide in amazement. 'I don't know how to thank you. I thought it was surely gone forever.'

'No thanks necessary,' Wilber said gallantly. 'Glad to be of help. A person needs all the help they can get these days, with all the crooks there are around. But I guess you'd know about that. We were kind of surprised to find out you're a private detective. Thought you said you were a secretary.'

'I usually say that,' Theresa said quickly. 'Private investigator tends to intimidate some people, and others ask too many questions.'

'I can believe that,' William said. 'You folks going this way? We were about to head back to our room. Been a long day.'

With that, the twins fell into step with Luke and Theresa, chatting amiably until Luke and Theresa turned off on Dumaine Street.

'This day is getting curiouser and curiouser, as Alice would have said,' Theresa commented as they started down the much quieter street. 'I wouldn't have bet a penny that those two would give back my bag if they did find it.'

'Neither would I,' Luke agreed. Suddenly his grip on Theresa tightened and he pulled her into a dark, recessed doorway.

'What...' she began, but he put his hand over her mouth.

'Just in case they were trying to lull us into a false sense of security,' he whispered, 'I think we'll stay here for a few minutes. OK?'

Theresa nodded, a feeling of despair sweeping over her. She should have thought of that, but she hadn't. Tears tried to well up again, but she blinked them back. A blubbering idiot was the last thing Luke needed on his hands. She not only wasn't any help, she was positively dangerous to him! He'd be better off without her. She stood silently in the circle of his arm, trying to be alert and watchful, but finding it difficult to fight off the dreamy feeling that being so close to Luke produced. She wanted to put her arms around him and lean against him and forget everything but this tiny little dark world of a doorway in New Orleans where they were alone together. Instead she held herself rigid,

until at last Luke looked at his watch and nodded.

'Ten minutes,' he said. 'I think if they were coming back, they would have by now, don't you?'

'I think so,' Theresa agreed. She watched as Luke leaned his head out and surveyed the street.

'All clear,' he announced. 'Let's move.' He grinned suddenly. 'Is that the right thing to say, under the circumstances? I still feel as if I'm playing cops and robbers.'

'It will do just fine,' Theresa said, hanging on to Luke's hand as he took off at a trot down the street. Any way he wanted to play it was fine. He was doing a lot better than she was.

In a few minutes, they were back inside the apartment. Luke looked at his watch again.

'Four minutes from that doorway,' he announced. 'We could probably do it faster.'

'You could do it faster without me,' Theresa said. She tossed her bag on to the floor and flopped face down on a huge green cushion. 'In fact, I think you'd get along a

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lot better without me,' she mumbled. 'I'll get out of your way tomorrow, and go back to chasing Toby McDonald. Maybe I can do that right.'

'Move over,' Luke said, lowering himself on to the cushion. He propped himself on one elbow and frowned at Theresa. 'What do you mean, get out of my way? You're not thinking of leaving again, are you?'

Theresa flicked a teary-eyed glance at him and nodded.

'You're going to leave me to face those two all alone?' he demanded.

'I think you'd be better off,' Theresa replied, swallowing hard, afraid to look into those beautiful dark eyes that were staring at her so accusingly. 'I'm t-trying to think of your welfare.' She flinched as Luke laid a hand against her cheek, then turned her face towards him. For a moment he continued staring at her.

'Turn over on your back,' he said finally, 'and look around. What do you see?'

Only briefly, Theresa thought of saying that she did not feel like playing one of Luke's

games. Before the thought could reach her tongue, she quelled it. This was no time for a petty argument. She turned over and looked.

'I see fig trees and palm trees and hanging baskets of begonias and some ferns...and what I always call airplane plants, with the little ones flying around the big ones, and a Norfolk pine.' She looked over at Luke. 'Is that what you mean?'

Luke nodded. 'It's a regular jungle, isn't it? And here we are, on this little green island in the middle of it, lost to the rest of civilisation. For all we know, they may never find us. The crocodiles in that swamp below us may get us. The lean panther that stalks the jungle may attack. But I'm not afraid, because I have you to talk to and to be brave for. If I were alone, I doubt I'd last a day. I'd be frightened and foolish and fall into the swamp and the crocodiles would eat me.' He smiled crookedly. 'You don't want the crocodiles to eat me, do you?'

Theresa shook her head. 'No,' she said slowly. She turned on her side and faced him.

'Why did you make up that story, instead of just telling me you wanted me to stay so you wouldn't be alone?' she asked.

'I don't know,' Luke said. 'Maybe because it's easier for me. I'm too used to living among Earthlings. It isn't permitted for males of the species to admit to being afraid, in spite of the fact that only fools never are. And I think it makes it easier for you, too. Does it? Or would you prefer I just be blunt?'

'No,' Theresa answered. 'I think you're right, in a way. It is easier, and much more fun.' But in another way, he wasn't right. Nothing was any easier now. For, as she had watched his face and listened to his voice as he'd woven his little story, an almost unbearable ache had built inside her. She knew she never wanted to be far from that voice, never far from the sight of his face. She loved Luke Thorndike so much that it hurt. How much more would it hurt her to love him? What did his wanting her to stay really mean? Did she dare to begin to hope that he cared for her?

'Well,' Luke said, 'will you stay?'

'I already said I didn't want the crocodiles to get you, didn't I?' Theresa replied with a rueful smile. 'Just be careful you don't trip over me and fall into the swamp.'

'Or come up behind you suddenly and have you throw me in,' Luke teased. 'Maybe I'd better learn some counter-measures.'

'If you hadn't kissed me like that, with all of those people around...' Theresa stopped, blushing. The kiss had been as much her fault as Luke's, and the look he was giving her said only too plainly that she had better not try and pin the blame on him.

'That's better,' Luke said, giving the tip of her nose a playful tap with his finger. 'For some mystical reason, we both knew it was time for that kiss, and I, for one, don't regret it at all. I was rather surprised, though, at the response we got. With all of the outlandish goings-on on Bourbon Street, I didn't think anyone would notice. I guess that proves an outstanding performance will draw a crowd every time.' He stood up and held out a hand to Theresa. 'Maybe if we practise, we can get even better.'

Theresa eyed his hand suspiciously and the started to push herself up without touching it She was definitely not ready for another kis just yet, not that ready to trust Luke not tc take advantage of her obvious response tc him. She gave a startled, 'Oh!' when Luke roughly pushed her back down on the cushion.

'Take my hand,' he said firmly, holding it out again. 'I can't wait forever for you to figure out that I am not a seething mass of corrupt intentions. I only wanted to help you up.'

Avoiding meeting Luke's eyes, Theresa took his hand and let him pull her to her feet. She felt wobbly and exhausted from the emotional turmoil of the day, his hand strong and warm and firm. Trustworthy. The hand of someone who would always be there. But her father's hand had felt like that, too, when she was little. She sighed heavily as Luke released his grip. Would that spectre always be there?

'What's wrong, Terry, love?' Luke asked softly. 'Did you want me to kiss you?'

'No!' Theresa said abruptly. 'I'm tired. I want to fix a place to sleep.' She felt a desperate need to wall off a little space for her bed, where she could be alone for a while. 'Maybe if we pull those four fig trees into a row across that corner, and that Norfolk pine,' she suggested, pointing to them.

'All right,' Luke said. 'We will fix you your own little Garden of Eden. Let's put this miniature lemon tree in there, too. It adds the right atmosphere. Too bad it isn't an apple tree.' He chuckled as he tugged the heavy plant on its castored stand into place. 'Do you suppose things would have turned out differently if Adam had sucked on a lemon?'

'I doubt it,' Theresa said drily. 'Eve would probably have just added a little extra sugar.'

'So you think the attraction between the sexes was inevitable?' Luke asked, pushing a fig tree into the line-up.

'I'm afraid so,' Theresa replied, wondering what Luke was leading up to now. She did not feel like engaging in a debate with Luke about sexual attraction at the moment. She did not want to think about sexual attraction.

She wanted to be alone so that she could stop fighting sexual attraction for a while. 'There,' she said, opening her bed and changing the subject. 'All I need now is some sheets and a pillow. It's too warm for a blanket.'

'Mmm-hmm,' Luke said. 'I know where they are. I found them today when I was looking for a place to stash those erotic pictures. I pity poor Harry if he needs that kind of stuff to get him aroused. I certainly don't, not with you around. They really opened a can of worms, didn't they, Adam and Eve? There I'll be, sleeping on a bed that's big enough for three or four people, simply because if you and I were there together we wouldn't be able to leave each other alone. Strange, isn't it?'

'Speak for yourself,' Theresa snapped, her nerves having wound themselves even tighter at Luke's statement that, with her around, he needed no pictures to arouse him.

'Tch, tch, such a short memory,' Luke chided. 'Sometimes I wonder...'

'All right! So it works both ways. The fact is, I'm sleeping here, and you're sleeping

there! Now will you just drop the subject and get me some sheets?' Theresa asked plaintively.

'In a minute,' Luke said. He folded his arms across his chest and cocked his head, looking thoughtful. 'Tell me, Terry, love, is the only reason I want you here some primitive, elemental urge that says the big, strong caveman must demonstrate his courage to the woman? Is the reason you're here because nature says you're supposed to find the biggest, strongest caveman around to be your mate? Or is there more than that between us?'

Theresa glared and advanced toward Luke. 'Right now, caveman,' she said, 'the only thing between you and another trip into the wild blue yonder is the fact that I'm too tired, and the only reason I'm here is insanity. Will you get me those sheets or do I have to...'

'Shhh,' Luke said, raising his head and listening intently. 'I thought I heard something.'

'What?' Theresa whispered. She could hear no unusual sound. Then suddenly, from the kitchen, came a loud crash and the sound of glass breaking.

CHAPTER FIVE

THERESA let out a gasp and instinctively flung herself into the protecting circle of Luke's arms. Almost immediately she realised what she had done and stiffened, trying to pull herself free. When Luke only tightened his grip, she looked up at him and frowned. Instead of looking frightened, he was smiling broadly.

'Caveman save you,' he whispered. 'I think it might only be from the cat, though, knocking over a jar. Shall we go and see?'

Theresa nodded, and together they tiptoed along a wall until they reached the kitchen door. All was quiet.

'Shall I turn on the light?' Luke whispered in Theresa's ear.

She nodded, ready to spring into action, while Luke reached his hand inside and found the light switch. The fluorescent bulbs flooded

the room with light. There was still no more noise.

Luke motioned toward the kitchen, his eyebrows raised questioningly.

'Very slowly,' Theresa mouthed, nodding.

They inched into the room. There was no one else there. Nor had the source of the noise been the cat, who was sleeping in his basket by the refrigerator.

'What in the devil...look over there, Theresa,' Luke said. He pointed to the small breakfast-table. On it was lying a large grapefruit. One pane of the old, multi-paned window behind the table was broken. 'Someone must have been playing toss the grapefruit and missed,' Luke said, starting for the object.

'Stop! Don't go near that!' Theresa cried.

Luke stopped, frowning. 'You don't think it's some sort of bomb, do you?' he said incredulously. 'It looks like a perfectly ordinary grapefruit.'

'Maybe it is, but... Oh, lord!' She leaped across the room and flipped off the lights. 'Let's get out of here,' she said, grabbing

Luke's arm and pulling him along with her. 'Someone could have done that so you'd investigate,' she explained when they were back in the living-room, 'and there you would have been, in front of the windows, a perfect target with the lights on.'

'Phew.' Luke looked shaken. He looked toward the french doors at the front of the living-room. 'The lights are on in here, too,' he said.

'Yes, but it's less likely someone would stand right out in front and take a shot. There are streetlights out there, all of those plants in the way, and they might have to stand and wait quite a while unless they got you to the window with another grapefruit,' Theresa said. 'What's out back? An alley?'

'A walled yard with a gate in it,' Luke replied. 'A dark walled yard. Maybe what I heard first was the click of the gate.' He frowned. 'What if that grapefruit goes boom?'

'I don't think it will,' Theresa replied. 'If it was anything sinister, I think it was just to attract your attention. I don't think the Brim-

stones are up to building a fancy bomb. It might just have been vandals, though. They throw rocks through windows all the time in Chicago. Maybe here they throw grapefruit.'

Luke began pacing back and forth among the plants, his movements agitated. Now and then he glanced towards the french doors. At last he went to one, peered out carefully, and then inspected the latch.

'Not much security there,' he said, rattling the door. He returned to Theresa and stood in front of her, his expression tense and serious. 'I *don't know whether it's vandals or* real criminals out there, but I don't like the idea of you sleeping in here,' he said. 'It would be damned easy for someone to get in and grab you. You take the bedroom. Old Harry has shutters on those windows. No person or grapefruit can get in.'

'Luke,' Theresa said soothingly, trying to calm him, 'no one's likely to come in and try to grab me. Why would they want to? Besides, in case you've forgotten, I'm very dangerous to grab.'

'Not if someone has a gun,' Luke replied. 'Don't argue.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake,' Theresa grumbled. She did not want to sleep in that weird bedroom. Even without the pictures, it brought to mind only one word. Sex. She went to the french doors and inspected them. 'These really are bad,' she said, frowning. Anyone with minimal skills at breaking in would have no trouble. 'We'll have to do something about them tomorrow.'

'Then do as I say,' Luke said firmly. 'Go in the bedroom and lock the door.'

'I will not! If it's not safe for me out here, it's even less safe for you. You don't know karate.'

Luke's eyes narrowed dangerously. 'Then,' he growled, 'I have the perfect solution.' With a quick move, he picked Theresa up, tossed her over his shoulder, and marched into the bedroom. 'There,' he said, putting her down and locking the door behind him. He turned and faced Theresa, who was standing, glowering at him. 'Now we're both safe.'

'I don't care much for your caveman act,' she said coldly, 'and I don't feel particularly safe in here with you. Open that door and let me out of here. I do not want to sleep in this...this disgusting room.' Nor did she especially want to give Luke another demonstration of her karate skills. But if he was going to be so unreasonable...

'I don't give a damn whether you do or not!' Luke roared, the usual velvet of his voice shredded to harsh tatters. 'This is not the time for a petty argument about the décor, when your life might be at stake. You know damn well you're safe with me. Can you guarantee there's not some maniac running loose out there?' He grabbed Theresa's wrist as she started to raise her hand to gesture. 'And don't try any of your fancy moves on me, either,' he snarled, 'because I'll just keep getting up and coming after you until I win, unless you kill me first.'

Theresa stared at him in disbelief. This was certainly a very different Luke Thorndike. 'But, Luke,' she said softly, trying a new tactic since he obviously meant what he said, 'my

suitcase is in the other room. I need to get my pyjamas and my toothbrush.'

'Not a chance,' Luke replied. 'You're staying right here. You can wear my pyjama top, and Harry, hospitable soul that he is, has a huge supply of new toothbrushes, fancy soaps, and all that.'

Theresa cast a sidelong glance at the huge, round bed beneath its shimmering, satin cover. 'I suppose I could sleep in the bathtub,' she said.

'You do, and I'll turn on the water,' Luke reatened. He rubbed his forehead. 'For God's sake, be reasonable, Theresa. If it will make you feel better, we can pile those fur pillows down the middle of the bed. But believe me, right now I'm not in the mood for any hanky-panky, and I assume you aren't, either. Or did you become a detective because the excitement turns you on?'

'Certainly not!' Theresa denied hotly. She eyed the bed again. If the word 'sin' were embroidered in the bedspread, she thought, it could not look more suggestively lush. 'If the sheets are satin, I *am* sleeping in the bathtub,'

she said defiantly. She walked stiffly over to the bed, threw the pillows to the floor, and pulled off the cover, revealing sheets that were not satin, but were white with little red hearts all over them. The bed wiggled strangely as Theresa felt it. 'Good lord, it's a water-bed. I'll get seasick.'

'No, you won't,' Luke said. 'They're very comfortable.' He knelt and arranged the pillows in a row down the centre of the bed, his jaw jutting at an uncompromising angle.

Theresa watched, her hands clenched at her sides, wondering irrelevantly whether she was dreaming or she was actually going to sleep in that bed with Luke. Nothing for the last half-hour or so seemed quite real, starting with the grapefruit coming through the window. She felt like laughing hysterically at the sight of the bed wobbling in waves beneath Luke's weight as he got up from it and stood up. It was going to be like that night on the sail-boat, going up and down, up and down. She clapped her hand over her mouth and followed Luke with her eyes as, still frowning, he went to the ornate, lacquered

dresser, opened a drawer, and pulled out a set of pyjamas.

'Here,' he said, thrusting the pyjama top towards her.

Theresa took it and stared at it. It was light blue silk, with LT embroidered on the pocket. Somehow, she hadn't thought Luke would go for initials on his clothing. 'LT,' she said thoughtfully.

'Theresa,' Luke said, his voice grating impatiently, 'would you please get your act together and go and put that on? The toothbrushes are in the drawer to the right, below the lavatory. If you want to take a shower, the knob in the middle is the one to turn.'

'You needn't treat me like an idiot,' Theresa said crossly.

'Then don't act like one,' Luke countered. 'Get moving. Or are you nailed to that spot?'

Theresa glared at him. 'Don't be so bossy,' she said. She turned and marched into the bathroom, locking the door behind her. For a moment, the brightness of the crystal chandelier reflecting from the mirrored walls

dazzled her eyes. There was scarcely an inch that wasn't mirrored, and she had the uncomfortable feeling that there were several people in the room with her. Maybe a hot shower would steam the mirrors over. She turned it on, then got in and stood still beneath the pulsing spray. 'I'm not going to hurry,' she muttered. There was no reason to hurry. She wasn't going to be able to sleep, anyhow, with Luke on the other side of that flimsy barricade.

But that's silly, she told herself as she dried herself with a huge pink towel. You can trust Luke. He said you could. He didn't bother you last night, did he? She put on the pyjama top, which came to several inches above her knees, and rolled up the cuffs. Last night, she knew, had been different. The setting had been different, she had been different. She hadn't re-evaluated how she felt about him then. She had only wanted to protect him. Or had she? She was no longer sure. Luke was different tonight, too. Masterful. Protective. If someone had asked, she would have said she'd hate a man to treat her that way, as if

she were helpless and fragile, but to be totally honest she hadn't minded that much. She frowned at her reflection as she brushed her teeth. Was she, after all, just a cavewoman looking for her strong protective hero, and not the tough, independent woman she had imagined? Or was it that adding that quality to all of Luke's other unique qualities made an almost irresistible combination?

'Theresa Long,' she said, bending forward and addressing her reflection seriously, 'just who is it that you don't trust?'

There was an impatient rap on the door. 'Are you going to stay in there all night talking to yourself?' Luke demanded.

'No, sir,' Theresa said meekly, opening the door. 'It's all yours.' She could feel his eyes following her as she walked across the toe-tickling fur rug to the bed and bent to turn the sheet back. Just as she lay down, she heard the door click shut behind him. The bed writhed beneath her as if it were alive. An experimental kick with one leg produced another orgy of activity, and Theresa smiled to herself. It was rather fun. She caught sight of

her reflection in the mirrored ceiling, and spent several minutes bouncing the bed and watching herself apparently bobbing on a sea of red hearts. This wasn't so bad, after all. She had been silly to worry and make a fuss. No wonder Luke was disgusted with her. She would apologise to him—in the morning. Better to keep him cross for now. She heard the bathroom door open, and quickly turned over and pretended to be asleep.

Luke turned off the light, then sat down heavily on the bed, sending it into a convulsion of activity. Theresa giggled in spite of herself.

'What's so funny?' Luke asked.

'I feel as if I ought to sing "Row, Row, Row Your Boat",' Theresa replied. 'Did you ever sing that, you know, like a round? A round in a round bed.' She giggled again. '"Row, row, row your boat,"' she began, 'come on, Luke, join in, "gently down the stream, merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream. Row, row, row..."'

'Theresa,' Luke growled, 'be quiet and go to sleep. I am not in the mood for singing.'

'Grouch,' Theresa muttered. 'Go to sleep yourself. Maybe you'll be in a better mood in the morning.'

'That,' Luke said, 'is exactly what I plan to do.'

Theresa closed her eyes. She was obviously going to be very safe with Luke tonight. Too bad she didn't feel especially happy about it. Oh, well, there was always tomorrow. She ought to be able to find some excuse to be here again, with Luke. Her eyes flew open. What was she thinking? She could almost hear her mother saying, 'Shame on you, Theresa!' That thought made her giggle again.

Luke turned, starting the bed tossing and waving again.

'Theresa,' he demanded, 'what is wrong with you?'

'Nothing.' She tried not to giggle, but couldn't help it. 'I think this water-bed tickles my funny bone,' she gasped out between chuckles.

Luke groaned. 'As long as you're awake, would you mind rubbing my neck? It's aching

like the devil. I think that fall gave me whiplash.'

'Oh, no! I knew you should have gone to the hospital,' Theresa said, dismayed out of her fit of giggles. She moved next to the fur pillows and reached for Luke's neck, then threw the top pillow out of the way. 'There,' she said, beginning to knead Luke's neck and shoulders. 'Tell me where it helps the most. I'm so sorry I hurt you. That was about the dumbest trick I've ever pulled.'

'Mmm,' Luke said, sighing in relief. 'Yeah. Right there. Beats me how someone as small as you are could do that. Your hands are strong, too.'

'You should see me break a board,' Theresa said, kneading her way out to Luke's shoulders and back. His skin felt so smooth and warm, but beneath it his muscles were tightly knotted. She got to her knees so that she could apply more pressure, flinging more pillows out of the way. 'How does that feel?' she asked, experimentally pounding up and down his back with the side of her hand.

'Heavenly,' Luke replied. He lifted his head. 'You aren't getting ready to break my back, are you?'

'No, silly, just relax. Shut your eyes. And mouth. You're tied up in knots.'

'Yes'm,' Luke said, lowering his head again.

As Theresa kneaded and massaged, she could feel Luke gradually relax, the tense muscles becoming supple beneath her hands. His breathing became soft and regular. He was asleep. She smiled wryly to herself. Poor darling. He must have been in quite a lot of pain. It was so nice to be able to make him feel better, since it was her fault in the first place. Slowly she lightened her touch, until she stopped, kneeling beside him, looking wistfully at his broad back, his dark head against the ridiculous, heart-covered pillow. She wished she could lie down next to him, her cheek against his shoulder, instead of retreating across the bed to her side . . . no, that would be asking for trouble. The pillows were gone now, and she didn't want to disturb him by putting them back. They could easily find

themselves in each other's arms, and that might lead to more serious consequences. She knew Luke wanted her, she knew he cared enough to carry her in here to keep her safe. But, before she made love to him, she needed to know that he loved her and wanted to keep her with him forever. Most of all, she needed to know that, if he made such a promise, she could trust him to keep it. To have him for only a short time and then lose him again would break her heart.

Carefully, so as to keep the shuddering bed from awakening him, Theresa lowered herself and moved a short distance away.

'Goodnight, Luke,' she whispered softly. To her surprise, he answered, apparently only half asleep.

'G'night,' he mumbled. He turned and threw one long arm across Theresa. 'C'mere, love,' he said, pulling her toward him. 'Turn a little. Put your back against me. That's right.' He tightened his grip, tucking her into the curve of his body, his arm snuggled beneath her breasts. A soft sound of contentment came from his throat, and then he

was fast asleep, his chest rising and falling against Theresa's back.

At Luke's touch, Theresa had tensed, wanting to be close and yet still afraid to. But, as the minutes passed, she, too, became drowsily content. If this was trouble, she was all for it, she thought with a rueful smile. Whether there was some vandal out there with a mania for throwing grapefruit instead of rocks, or someone more sinister, she didn't know, but whoever it was she would like to thank him. She closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep, still smiling.

Theresa awoke with a start to the sound of a car door slamming and Luke's voice calling out, 'Thanks!' Good heavens, where had he been and what time was it?

She jumped out of bed and ran to peep out of the french doors. A bright red foreign sports car was parked at the kerb. Luke was coming up the front path, followed by an attractive redhead wearing tight jeans and a T-shirt that clung to her ample bosom like wallpaper. Both were carrying grocery bags.

Well! Never let it be said that Luke Thorndike didn't work fast, Theresa thought grimly. He probably knew that in that horizontal-striped shirt that made his broad shoulders look even broader, and those tight jeans, almost any woman would drop everything and follow him. It looked as if that one was going to follow him right into the house! Oh, no! Theresa looked down at her own scantily clad form. She had better... Before she could gather her wits and beat a swift retreat to the bedroom, the door opened. She froze, hoping the fig tree beside her would hide her, but Luke spotted her immediately.

'Well, hello, sleepyhead,' he said, as unconcerned as if she were fully dressed. 'Did you just get up? This is our neighbour, Patsy Muffett. She wants to see our grapefruit.'

Theresa moved out from behind the fig tree and gave Luke a deadly glance and the woman a frozen smile. 'Nice to meet you,' she said.

'Hi!' said Patsy, a knowing smile on her face as she appraised Theresa's attire. 'Sorry

to barge in, but I did want to see that grapefruit. I think I may know where it came from.'

'Come on,' Luke said, leading the way toward the kitchen. 'It's still on the table. I haven't touched the thing yet. I thought maybe one of my enemies had tossed me a yellow grenade.'

'Oh, Luke,' Patsy burbled, 'You're so funny.' She turned to Theresa, who had followed, unable to make up her mind whether she would look any more foolish if she ran off to get dressed or stayed the way she was, in Luke's pyjama top. 'Is Luke always so funny?' she asked.

'A laugh a minute,' Theresa replied drily. 'Where do you think the grapefruit came from?'

'Well, there's this bunch of crazies...' Patsy put down her bag of groceries on the counter and went to pick up the grapefruit. 'It's them, all right,' she said, turning the grapefruit over in her hand. 'See?' On the under side of the grapefruit was written, in black indelible pen, 'Repent. The End Is Near!'

Luke stared at the message, then burst out laughing. 'You mean there's some group that goes around throwing those things through windows?'

Patsy nodded. 'They call themselves Elijah's Prophets. Once in a while one of them gets caught, but most of the time people just clean up the mess and forget it. I can tell you who to call to fix that glass. They had to do mine last winter. Here, I'll write it down for you,' as Luke took out his notepad. She wrote down the name of a glass company, then handed the notepad back. 'It's a shame that had to happen your first night here,' she said, in her gurgly Southern drawl, 'before you had a chance to find out about all the silly things that go on here in the Quarter. I declare, sometimes it's like living in a zoo.' She smiled at Theresa and beamed at Luke. 'I'm so glad I got to meet you. I can see you all have unfinished business, so I'll just run on home now, but if you need anything, just holler. Y'all hear?'

'Yes, ma'am,' Luke replied, treating her to one of his warmest smiles. 'And thanks again

for taking me to the store. We might have starved without you.'

'It was my pleasure,' Patsy said. 'Bye, now.'

Theresa watched as she bounced off, with Luke, ever the gentleman, escorting her to the door. He returned and lifted one eyebrow at Theresa, who was still standing by the table, trying to decide whether to say anything first, or give in to an impulse to start throwing things at him without warning. His mouth quirked into a mischievous smile.

'I'll bet you're thinking the same thing I am,' he said. 'We ought to send Elijah's Prophets a donation.'

'That is *not* what I was thinking!' Theresa said loudly. 'Couldn't you have been a little more obvious? "Look, there's Theresa in my pyjama top. She just got up." I have never been so embarrassed in my life! Your bosomy friend certainly thought she had everything figured out. "Unfinished business"!'

Luke rubbed his chin. 'Well, I suppose I could have said, see that person in the blue pyjama top over there behind the fig tree? That's Theresa. She stands there like that, by

the window, night and day. I doubt Patsy would have bought that, though. Or is her bosom what's bothering you?'

'Certainly not! The least you could have done was wake me before you left to go... wherever you went.'

'No, I couldn't,' Luke said, shaking his head and smiling ruefully. 'As soon as I woke up and looked at you there beside me, I knew I had to get up and out of there in a hurry. There was only one thing on my mind. So I sneaked out and let you sleep, planning to walk to some nearby store and find something for our breakfast. Little Miss Muffett was out in front watering her tuffets, and she offered to take me in her car to a real supermarket to shop. I thought surely you'd be up and dressed by the time I got back.' His smile widened slowly, his eyes sweeping down Theresa's form and back to her eyes. 'Or were you just waiting around in that outfit to tempt me again?'

'No!' Theresa snapped, cursing the warmth that spread through her and set her cheeks aflame. That smile of his made her only too

aware of what was still occupying his mind, and it was very difficult to remember why she had been so upset with him. His explanation had sounded completely reasonable, and if he didn't stop smiling at her like that... She gave herself a mental shake. 'I'll get dressed right away and help with breakfast,' she said, starting to hurry past him. He reached out and caught her.

'Wait a minute,' he said, pulling her to him and then locking his hands behind her. 'You haven't even asked if I saw the Brimstones while I was out.'

'Well...well, did you?' Theresa asked, looking up at him, but scarcely able to breathe. It seemed as if Luke's hands, firm against her back, were burning through the silk of his pyjama top and setting her skin on fire.

'No,' Luke replied, 'but I could have. They could have been parked in that black car across the street. Patsy could have been an accomplice, hired to bring me to them.' He put his fingers beneath Theresa's chin and caressed back and forth, his eyes sparkling with

a gentle mirth. 'It's a good thing I'm only keeping you around for company, isn't it? Between embarrassment and jealousy, and wanting the same thing I want, you don't keep your mind on detective work very well.'

Theresa swallowed hard, feeling tears welling up. It was true. She had been so caught up in her own feelings that she hadn't thought once about the Brimstones. 'I'm sorry,' she said in a small voice. 'I know I'm not being much help. I was certainly wrong about that ridiculous grapefruit.'

'Ah, yes, the grapefruit.' Luke lifted Theresa's chin. 'Look me in the eyes, Theresa,' he said. 'Can you honestly say that there wasn't some point last night when you were very glad it came crashing in through the window?'

'Well, I . . . n-no,' Theresa replied, unable to avoid Luke's eyes and knowing that it would be useless to deny it, when that was exactly what she had thought. What, she wondered with a shiver, would Luke think if he knew she'd even thought of inventing some excuse for tonight?

'And are you still glad?' Luke persisted.

Theresa frowned. What was he driving at now? 'Why shouldn't I be?' she asked.

'Answer me first,' Luke said firmly.

'Yes, I'm still glad,' Theresa replied. Going to sleep in Luke's arms had been heavenly. Just remembering it was dangerous to her equilibrium. What was the point in lying about it when she felt herself melting closer and closer against him, her eyes more and more fascinated with the soft curves of his mouth?

'Good,' Luke said. 'I think we're making progress.'

'I still don't understand,' Theresa complained. 'I haven't had any coffee yet, and my mind isn't working very well.' Not to mention the fact that she was so aware of every inch of Luke's body against hers that she could scarcely think at all.

'Well,' Luke said, smiling now and beginning to stroke her back with devastating effect, 'I was afraid you might focus on the fact that if the grapefruit hadn't frightened us, you'd have slept on your bed, I'd have awakened you when I got up, and we'd have

gone off in search of breakfast together, thus avoiding your unpleasant encounter with our neighbour, and eliminating my need to get so well acquainted with her.'

'Oh,' Theresa said. It was all so complicated. 'I didn't think about that angle at all,' she admitted with a sigh. 'Why did you think that I would?'

'Because you've been so afraid to get close to me,' Luke answered, 'and even more afraid to admit that you wanted to.' He squeezed her shoulders. 'Now, run along and get dressed. I'm not going to kiss you now, because in that outfit, the temptation might be too much for both of us, and I don't think we're ready to get that close yet.' He ran his hands down Theresa's body and then patted her bottom. 'Scoot,' he said.

Theresa walked slowly into the bedroom, rather than scooting, feeling as if she were sleepwalking. Somewhere along the line, she seemed to have lost control of the situation, she mused. She had been going to keep herself and Luke under control, and now he was the one who had the upper hand. She had better

find some way to at least get control of herself, or she was going to find herself making love to Luke on his terms, and not complaining a bit!

CHAPTER SIX

'HOW does French toast made with thick slices of French bread sound?' Luke asked when Theresa returned to the kitchen, dressed in navy blue slacks and a white cotton cable sweater.

'Fattening,' Theresa replied. 'Only one slice for me.'

'Now, Terry, love——' Luke began, but she interrupted him.

'Don't "Terry, love" me,' she said. 'I know how much I should eat, and I'm not going to let you fatten me up for slaughter.'

She had decided while she dressed that she was going to have to regain the upper hand in everything and not let Luke cajole and badger her into doing things. No matter how far their relationship did or didn't go, it was a bad precedent to set. She hadn't worked so hard to become an independent woman these last few years, just to let him turn her into a

submissive little mouse again. If she had been more assertive five years ago, she might not have fallen so completely under his spell, and felt so devastated when she discovered that, like her father, his feet were made of clay.

Luke shrugged. 'I certainly wouldn't want you to outgrow those trousers. You fill them out rather nicely now. Nice outfit.'

'Quent likes me to dress well when I'm representing the agency,' Theresa replied, relieved that he didn't argue about the French toast, and trying to ignore the warm glow that followed his compliment. 'Which reminds me, I'd better start hunting for Toby McDonald as soon as we're through breakfast. It's almost noon now, and since it's Saturday, everything should be in full swing before long. What can I do to help?'

'Just pour the coffee,' Luke replied. 'Everything else is ready.' He carried their plates to the table. 'Tell me about this McDonald chap,' he suggested as he began to attack his breakfast with gusto.

He would be one of those people who can eat everything and never gain weight, Theresa

thought bitterly, watching him. She frowned, then answered, 'He's a fifty-one-year-old building contractor. He came down here a couple of years ago for a jazz festival and met Carmelita, the dancer. When he didn't come home when he was supposed to, his wife came and found him and dragged him back home. He was very apologetic and said it would never happen again. His wife told him if it did, he needn't come back. Well, it seems to have happened again. He packed everything, including his most treasured possession, an old trumpet that used to belong to Louis Armstrong, into his car and left. We think he's in New Orleans from some credit card purchases he made. Anyway, now his wife's changed her mind. She wants him back, but she's afraid to come after him herself and tell him. I'm supposed to find him and convey the message and a letter from Mrs McDonald. After that, it's up to fate, I guess.'

'So,' Luke said, smiling broadly, 'today we interview dancers.'

Theresa looked down at her plate and then directly back at Luke. 'No,' she said, 'today

I interview dancers. It's my job, and I think I'd better do it myself. I'm sure you could use some time alone to get started on your writing.'

Luke leaned back in his chair and scowled. 'As I recall,' he said, his voice rough around the edges, 'you told me you wanted me to help you because I might be able to find out more than you could from the ladies. I can't think of any reason why that wouldn't still be true. Have you some lame-brained idea that keeping me out of those dens of moderate iniquity is going to improve my moral fibre? Because if you do, believe me, Theresa, I've seen things a lot more sinful before and probably will again.'

'I am not the least bit concerned with your moral fibre,' Theresa denied hotly. 'The point is simply that I want to do the job myself. I'm not worried about my moral fibre, and I certainly am not worried about yours.'

'Well, maybe I'm worried about you going into those places alone,' Luke said, still frowning. 'In fact, I don't want you to do it. Someone might mistake you for one of the

dancers in street clothes and make a grab for you.'

'He'll be sorry if he does,' Theresa replied. 'You seem to forget about that. Or doesn't it fit your image of me as a poor little helpless female? Just because I let you get away with playing caveman last night it doesn't mean anyone else can. Or that you're going to again, either,' she added, as Luke shot her a sharp glance.

Luke rubbed his forehead and sighed. 'I guess I should have kissed you, after all,' he said.

'And just what does that mean?' Theresa snapped. 'Do you think that if you keep me sexually aroused you'll be able to dictate what I'm to do or not to do? If that's what you think, I've got news for you, Luke Thorndike. I may have a weak moment now and then, but generally I don't like being bullied and bossed around.'

'I *should* have kissed you,' Luke said positively. His mouth curved into a slow smile. 'I probably should have done more than that. You're even more frustrated *than I am*.'

'You're crazy!' Theresa said, taking a last swallow of her coffee. She stood up. 'Not only that,' she said, 'but you are so egotistical that you turn me off completely. How you can twist around the fact that I want to go out and do the job that I came to do by myself into some wild idea that that means I'm a mass of sexual frustrations that only you can relieve, I can't imagine.'

'Very simple,' Luke replied, his eyes bright with mischievous lights. 'Before you got dressed, you were all cuddly and warm and lovable. You would have been happy to have me come with you anywhere, I'll wager. Now you're a regular shrew. Tell me, Kate, what will it take to tame you? Several more nights on that bed? I think that's what tamed the original Kate, not the bard's immortal words.'

'You would!' Theresa glared at him. 'Unfortunately, I have no desire to be tamed by you or anyone else. You can take me the way I am or leave me alone, I don't care. I'm going right now. You stay here. You should be quite safe from the Brimstones here in the daytime,

but for heaven's sake, don't open the door without looking first. I'll be back by five.'

Luke stood and followed Theresa to the door, looking thoughtful. 'All right, I'll stay here this time,' he said. 'Maybe you need to try it alone to be convinced that it might go better with my help, and that it doesn't take anything away from you to have me along. Be careful. I'm going to be worried about you.'

'You don't need to be,' Theresa said tightly. 'I don't spend all of my time in Chicago in the best neighbourhoods.'

'I know,' Luke replied. 'That worries me, too.' He bent suddenly and kissed Theresa's cheek. 'By the way,' he said, as she looked at him, startled, 'I have a question for you.' He drew an imaginary line down the centre of Theresa's body with his finger. 'If you were painted red on this side...' he pointed to her right, 'and green on this side...' he pointed to her left, 'would you be two different people, or still one person?'

'That's a silly question. One person, of course,' Theresa replied.

'Yes,' Luke said, 'but if one person saw only the red side, and another person saw only the green, they might think you were two different people, mightn't they?'

'I suppose so.' Theresa frowned. 'What is this green and red person nonsense all about?'

Luke grinned. 'A little something for you to think about while you're out pounding the pavement. Keeps you from getting bored. Just don't get to thinking too hard about it and forget what you're doing. And don't forget to keep an eye out for the Brimstones. They might come up with the idea of taking you hostage to get to me, since they've seen us together a couple of times now.'

'I'll be careful, Luke,' Theresa said impatiently. 'Stop playing mother hen. I don't like it any better than you do.' Which was, she decided, as she headed for Bourbon Street, not quite the truth. There was something very comforting about having him fuss over her. Why should that be, when having Quentin do the same thing, as he often did, simply annoyed her? And what did Luke mean by that strange question about green and red people?

If she knew him at all, it had nothing to do with green and red, but meant something much more complicated.

Theresa joined the milling throng on the part of Bourbon Street that was permanently closed to traffic. There were, she knew, several places that advertised shows featuring exotic dancers. She might as well start enquiring about Carmelita at the first one she came to.

It was between shows in the first place she entered. Scantily clad waitresses were bringing drinks to the patrons, who were seated at tiny tables in the smoky, dimly lit room.

'I don't want a ticket,' Theresa said to the leering man who barred her way. 'A friend of mine told me to look up a dancer he used to know named Carmelita when I was in town, but he wasn't sure where she worked. Do you know her?'

'You a dancer?' the man asked, looking Theresa up and down appraisingly.

'No.' Theresa grimaced. 'I used to dance some, but I had to quit. Back trouble. I work in a department store in Chicago no

The man looked more pleasant, almost sympathetic, Theresa thought. She had chosen the right approach. He nodded. 'Them bumps and grinds can do that to you,' he said. 'We don't have any Carmelita here, but you can go on back and see if any of the girls know where you can find her.' He pointed. 'Past the stage and through that door.'

'Thanks,' said Theresa, beaming. 'Thanks a lot.' She made her way backstage, where a dozen or so girls were repairing make-up, changing costumes, or simply sitting and staring into space. A tall brunette looked at Theresa curiously.

'You aren't the new girl, are you?' she asked, her expression clearly incredulous.

Theresa was momentarily taken aback, then she grinned. 'I'm afraid not. Wish I was good enough. Or tall enough.' She repeated her story about her search for Carmelita.

'Don't know her,' said the tall brunette. She turned her head and raised her voice. 'Anyone here know where to find a Carmelita? This gal's lookin' for her.'

Most of the girls shook their heads, but a black-haired beauty came forward.

'Whatcha want to find Carmelita for?' she asked, looking suspiciously at Theresa.

'I met a fellow in Chicago who used to know her,' Theresa explained, not surprised at the question. She expected the dancers to be protective of each other. 'He wanted me to look her up and tell her hello for him. I think he's still carrying a torch for her.'

'Lots of guys do that,' said the dancer. She shrugged. 'I think she's still working at the Moonbeam Club. It's across the street and down a block. You can't miss it.'

Theresa thanked the girl and went back out to the street, blinking in the bright sunlight. If Carmelita was still at the Moonbeam Club, this was going to be easier than she'd thought. Wouldn't Luke be surprised that she'd done so well without him? Thinking of Luke reminded her of the Brimstone brothers, and she quickly scanned the crowd. They were not in the area that she could see, but she decided to zigzag back and forth on her way down the street and keep her eyes open for the pair. Too

bad they weren't painted red and green, she thought wryly. They would be a lot easier to spot.

She repeated her story at the Moonbeam Club which was, she discovered, not much different from the previous place, except that the show was in full swing, and the patrons were making encouraging comments on the dancers' efforts. The response to her question, however, was different and discouraging.

'She ain't here no more,' the man said. 'She quit last week and went off with some guy.'

'Some guy?' Theresa asked, her heart sinking. Had Toby McDonald really gone all the way this time?

'Yeah. A sailor. I think she's living with him someplace, but I don't know where.'

Theresa breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't Toby. 'Do you think one of the girls might know?' she asked.

'Could be,' the man replied. 'If you wanta wait until after the show, you can ask them.'

Theresa waited and asked, but the girls were unable, or unwilling, to tell her. 'Did she ever mention a Toby McDonald?' she asked,

thinking it sadly unlikely that a young woman in love with a sailor would have had any cause to do so. To her surprise, several of the girls laughed at her question.

'You mean that short, bald guy from Chicago?' one of them asked. 'He used to hang around here all the time, a couple of years back. Nearly drove Carmelita crazy. Harry Jefferson finally ran him off. She was going with Harry, then. Harry's kind of a famous artist.'

'I know,' Theresa said. If that wasn't a strange coincidence! Luke's friend Harry had been involved with Carmelita, too. 'Well, thanks anyway,' she said. Discouraged, she wandered farther down Bourbon Street, then turned off on to a side street and found a pavement café where she sat down and ordered a Coke. Without the Carmelita lead, she had no idea where to look for the errant Mr McDonald. He might not be in New Orleans at all. Or he might have become infatuated with another dancer. She should have thought of that before. Now, it was going to be hard to go back and ask a different question. She

might need Luke's help, after all. After the way she'd acted this morning, he might not want to help her. He was such a strange man. So funny, and yet so serious. Red and green. Two people in one.

'That's what he meant!' Theresa said aloud, then looked around, embarrassed. She smiled to herself. No one had noticed her revelation. Two people in one. Was he trying to tell her that she could be both a competent, self-reliant private investigator, and a woman who was...what had he said...warm, and cuddly and lovable at the same time? She wasn't sure that was possible. She didn't feel as if she could. When one side appeared, the other seemed to vanish. Maybe Luke only thought she could because he was so good at changing back and forth, chameleon-like. Maybe he only wanted her to because he had the upper hand when she was under his spell. She sighed. If she disagreed with him, that was certain to start an argument.

She finished her drink and then looked at her watch. Almost four o'clock. She hated to go back and tell Luke of her failure, but she

might as well get it over with. Maybe he'd have some helpful ideas.

Theresa decided not to plough through the crowds on Bourbon Street again, instead going to Dauphine before heading back toward Luke's apartment. There were still plenty of people to dodge, but she had not gone far before she spotted the Brimstone brothers walking along briskly in the same direction as she was going. I wonder where they're going, she thought, quickening her pace to keep up with them, but staying far enough back to be able to duck out of sight if necessary. When they reached Dumaine, they turned toward Luke's apartment, but stayed on the opposite side of the street from it. Theresa's pulse accelerated. She crossed Dauphine, then peered carefully around the corner. The Brimstones were walking very slowly now, staying in the shadows cast by the late afternoon sun. From time to time they would look over at Luke's apartment, then put their heads together in serious conversation. Theresa slipped around the corner and got as close as she dared without attracting

their attention, ready to vanish into a nearby doorway if necessary. The men came to a stop across from Luke's apartment. They looked back and forth again. One of them nodded and looked at his watch. Then they turned and came in Theresa's direction. She flattened herself against the wall and held her breath, hoping they would not look, then breathed a sigh of relief after they had passed. As soon as she dared, she peeked out, saw them round the corner on to Dauphine again, and then flew across the street and let herself into the apartment.

'Luke!' she called. She peered into the bedroom, then hurried towards the kitchen. 'Luke! Where are...' She stopped. Well! When the cat's away, she thought. Luke and Patsy were sitting at the table, a bowl of shrimps between them.

'Patsy brought over some of her spiced shrimp,' Luke said, giving Theresa a rather defiant look. 'You ought to try them.'

'Maybe later,' Theresa replied, noticing that Patsy looked very smug.

'I was just trying to talk Luke into going to a place I know that has absolutely the best seafood gumbo,' Patsy said, giving Theresa an overly sweet smile. 'Would you like to come along?'

'No, thanks,' Theresa said, eyeing Luke, who was now looking decidedly uncomfortable. 'I think I'll be staying home this evening. I discovered that some old friends of ours may be dropping in.' She raised her eyebrows meaningfully at Luke. By his startled expression, she could tell that he got her meaning. Now to see if she could get rid of that insidious little shrimp-bearer, so that she could talk to Luke alone. 'Why don't you run along with Patsy?' Theresa asked smoothly, giving him a sugary smile. 'Just be sure you call before you come back. I'd hate for you to be surprised by what you find when you get here.'

The horrified look on Patsy's face was almost too much for Theresa, but she managed to keep a straight face while she waited for Luke to come up with something

brilliant to save the situation. He did not disappoint her.

'And miss all the fun?' he said, as if that were out of the question. He shook his head. 'No way. Sorry, Patsy, I'm afraid I'll have to take a raincheck.'

'That's all right. I understand,' she said quickly. 'Old friends, and all that.' She gathered up her shrimps and started toward the door all in one movement. 'I hope you all have a . . . a real good time,' she said. ''Bye, now.'

As soon as Patsy was out the door, Theresa burst out laughing. 'Nice work,' she said as Luke returned, his own eyes twinkling. 'Sorry the Brimstones spoiled your evening out.'

'Not bad yourself,' he replied. 'And don't go jumping to foolish conclusions. I'm almost glad the boys are coming. I was wondering how to get out of that gumbo feast without being rude to Patsy. She's as persistent as a bad case of poison ivy.' He sat back down at the table and then frowned. 'Damn! She left her car keys,' he said, picking up a pair of keys attached to a small ring.

'I'll put them by the telephone. She'll probably be back for them in a few minutes,' Theresa said. She carried the keys into the living-room, then returned. 'Want to hear all about it?' she asked.

'In a minute,' Luke replied. He turned his chair sideways to the table and patted his knee. 'Come here, Terry, love. We have some unfinished business from this morning.'

'What kind of business?' Theresa asked warily. From the gleam in his eyes, it was apparent that thoughts of the Brimstone brothers were not uppermost in his mind. Was he still brooding about her alter ego? This was hardly the time for that!

'I made a mistake this morning,' Luke said. 'I want to rectify it. Either come here, or...' he gave her a devilish smile, 'I'll come and get you.'

'No!' Theresa backed away, frowning. 'Luke Thorndike, you stop this nonsense,' she said, as he got up and started toward her. 'I thought you understood what I was saying. The Brimstone brothers...' she turned and ran into the living-room, putting a potted

palm tree between them, 'are planning something. I followed them all the way down...' she circled the palm, 'Dauphine Street. They came down Dumaine and looked at your apartment, and then...' she jumped away as Luke made a grab for her '...they went back.'

'Casing the joint, huh?' Luke said, moving stealthily towards Theresa, like a prowling cat. 'And then they are going to...' he lunged suddenly and caught Theresa, 'try and catch me napping?'

'It looks as if they're going to,' Theresa snapped, trying to pull herself free. 'Will you pay attention? We need to decide what to do.'

'I've already decided,' Luke said calmly. 'Stop wiggling. I'm going to kiss you.'

'But, Luke,' Theresa pleaded, feeling her heart accelerate in spite of her desire to remain calm and make some sensible plans, 'we can't just pretend nothing's going to happen. You may be in real danger.'

'And so may you,' Luke said softly, caressing Theresa's hair back from her forehead. 'This is the perfect time for a kiss. Think how we'd feel if something terrible did happen,

and we'd missed this opportunity.' He smiled slowly. 'Would you want that to happen?'

Theresa felt her knees go weak, just as they had that long-ago day when she had first seen Luke's smile. No, she thought, she would not want that to happen. If he were to be...she dared not finish the thought. She raised her face to his, blinking back the tears that had anticipated her thoughts and filled her eyes. 'No,' she whispered hoarsely. In an instant, Luke's mouth covered hers, so warm and sweet that it took her breath away. She flung her arms around his broad back and clung to him fiercely, responding with abandon to the hunger of his kiss. Her sweet, funny, serious Luke. She adored him so. The wonder of that realisation sent her heart soaring. She murmured soft sounds of happiness, feeling a heightened joy at every sensation of touch and taste that passed between them, as if some barrier had been passed that released her from a prison of restraints. She belonged to Luke Thorndike, for better or worse, whenever and however he might want her.

Luke abandoned her mouth and showered Theresa's face with light little kisses, ending with his lips nuzzling her ear. 'Oh, Terry, love,' he murmured, 'I've waited so long for you to kiss me like that.'

Theresa nuzzled him back, kissing beneath his chin, burying her face against his neck and breathing deeply, absorbing the essence that was uniquely his. 'Maybe the best plan,' she said huskily, 'would be for us to go in the bedroom and lock the door and not come out until the Brimstones have died of old age.' To her surprise, Luke pulled his head back and frowned at her severely.

'Theresa Long,' he scolded, 'are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting? An illicit relationship?'

'Don't tell me the thought hadn't occurred to you,' she said, stiffening and trying to pull herself free of Luke's tight embrace. She felt as if she had suddenly received a splash of cold water in the face. What kind of turnabout was he doing now?

'Of course it had,' he replied, putting his hand behind her neck and pulling it against

his chest so that she could feel the vibrations when he chuckled. 'There's nothing wrong with the thought,' he said. 'I'm very flattered. But my job isn't quite finished yet, so I'm afraid you'll have to wait, just as I will. Do you think we can live on kisses until then?'

Theresa groaned. 'I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about,' she said. 'Between your mysterious job and your red and green people, you have me so confused I hardly know what I think. Do you suppose you could be a little more specific?' She raised her head and looked into Luke's dark eyes, trying to fathom what he was thinking. It was no use, for all he did was smile and shake his head. 'Great,' she grumbled. 'Do you have any magical mumbo jumbo that will make the Brimstones disappear? If not, we'd better try some plain old brain-power to figure out what they might be planning and what we can do to stop them.'

'I like the way you say "we" lately,' Luke said. He brushed Theresa's lips with his own again, then let them linger softly against them.

'Do you suppose,' Theresa said with a sigh, letting her lips move against his, 'that we're just having a dream? I can't think of any other reason we'd be standing here like this, kissing away our future and maybe kissing it goodbye.'

'I think we're beginning to have one,' Luke replied, ending his statement by deepening his kiss again. The telephone rang and he raised his head. 'Damn! Who could that be?'

'Probably just Patsy wanting to know if we found her keys,' Theresa replied. 'You'd better answer. I don't think she's too fond of me.'

Luke answered the telephone, and moments later held it out toward Theresa. 'It's your brother,' he said.

'Maybe he's turned up something on the Brimstones,' Theresa said, taking it. 'Hello, Quent. What's up?' When she hung up a short time later, she shook her head at Luke. 'Nothing definite yet. Quent found out when the Brimstones got out of prison and where they went. It wasn't to Las Vegas. They went to Hollywood. There must be someone there

who has it in for you. Quent's going to get in touch with some contacts out there tomorrow.'

'I don't know who it could be,' Luke said, frowning. 'As I said before, success breeds enemies, but I can't imagine anyone that I know hating me enough to want me dead. Well, now that the spell is broken, what shall we do? I'd suggest turning out the lights and going back to kissing in the dark, but I'm hungry. I should have eaten more of Patsy's shrimp.'

'I'm starved,' Theresa said. 'Maybe we could find a candle, turn out the lights, and go in the end of the kitchen away from the window and make some sandwiches. That should be safe enough.'

While they followed Theresa's plan, they discussed the possible plans of attack that the Brimstone brothers might use.

'They might not be going to take a shot at me in here,' Luke pointed out. 'They might have one come in through the front door, and when I try to escape out the back, the other one would be waiting to nail me.'

'Or they might try to overpower you and get you into a car so they could dispose of you somewhere far away,' Theresa said, shuddering at the thought. 'Just because we haven't seen them with a car, it doesn't mean they couldn't rent one.'

'Well, whatever they do,' Luke said, fixing Theresa with an intently serious look, 'I want you to stay out of the way and out of sight. This is my problem. No heroics. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Luke,' Theresa said, pretending meek submission. And, she thought, if you think I'm going to let anything happen to you without doing my best to prevent it, you're crazy.

When they had finished their sandwiches, Luke snuffed out the candle. 'Shall we curl up on one of those cushions and kiss the time away?' he asked, putting his arm around Theresa.

'I don't think we'd be very alert if we did,' Theresa replied. 'However...' as Luke stopped and kissed her in the middle of the living-room, 'maybe we could pull one of the

cushions near the french doors and keep an eye on the street.'

'Good idea,' Luke agreed. He pushed aside several plants and tugged one of the giant cushions into position, then held out his arms to Theresa. 'Let's get comfortable. This could be a long night.'

'They might not even come tonight,' Theresa said as she snuggled against Luke on the cushion. 'Maybe they were planning something for tomorrow.'

'I thought of that,' Luke said, finding Theresa's lips with a brief kiss. 'Do you suppose we could arrange for food to be brought in so we don't have to move?'

'Why not?' Theresa said, putting her arms behind Luke's neck and pulling his head down to hers. She kissed him thoroughly, letting her hands begin to explore his broad chest.

'No, no,' Luke said, catching one hand and holding it fast. 'Only kissing. I don't want to be caught literally with my pants down.'

Theresa giggled and then shook her head. 'I don't know what's got into me tonight. I'm not behaving sensibly at all.' She turned and

looked up at Luke in the dim, shadowy light filtering in from the street. He was looking at her and smiling, as if he knew the answer to her question. 'Why do I have the feeling that you're one jump ahead of me?' she asked.

'Because I am,' he replied, the whiteness of his teeth gleaming as he laughed softly. 'Because I know that my job is just this far...' he held up two fingers, very close together, 'from being done.'

'Oh, dear, that job again,' Theresa said. She sighed and leaned her head against Luke's shoulder. His so-called job must have something to do with what she was doing. She was being what he had called cuddly and lovable. What was it that she was almost, but not quite, doing? Obviously, it didn't mean making love, for he had ruled that out. There was something she was still missing. 'Can't you give me just a little clue?' she asked.

Luke was silent for a long time. 'All right,' he said at last, lying back and looking up at the ceiling, 'I'll give you a very good clue. Suppose we are just as we are, but this cushion is a raft, afloat in the ocean. We've been on

it for days, cast adrift when our ship went down. We're out of food and water. The end is near for both of us. Our lips are so dry, our throats so parched, that we can no longer speak. We find, among our remaining provisions, a marking pen with which we can write one last message to tell each other some one thing we had meant to say. What would you write?' He turned and watched Theresa's face intently.

Theresa studied Luke's face, his cheekbones accented by an angular shaft of light from the street, his deep-set eyes so bright and warm they seemed to illuminate the space between them. But there was a tension about his mouth, a faint creasing about his eyes, as if her answer was very important, and he was not quite sure what it would be. But, she thought, as she looked at his dear face and imagined herself on that raft with him, she knew very well what she would write. It was, after all, what she should be telling him now, even though she was still a little afraid. But would he write the same thing?

'I love you,' she answered huskily. 'What would you write?' She felt an almost unbearable tension as Luke's eyes filled with tears, even though he was now smiling. Then suddenly he pulled her into his arms and buried his face in her soft hair.

'Oh, Theresa, my darling, I love you so dearly,' he whispered. His mouth found its way to hers, his passion so intense and reckless now that Theresa gasped at the knowledge of how much he had been holding back before. His hands explored her body, frenzied messages of desire colliding with the deep satisfaction of knowing how much he cared. 'I love you, I love you, I love you,' he murmured as his lips created a fiery path along the trail of bare skin which his eager hands revealed. Theresa answered with the same words, lost in a longing so intense that she was aware only of Luke's lips against her skin, teasing the peaks of her breasts, his tongue tickling her navel. When he turned to pin her beneath him, she revelled in the pulsing movements of his hard, male arousal against her. Her hands clutched at his back, as if to

hold him close would make him a part of her forever. Then, very abruptly, he pulled away and looked into her eyes, his mouth drawn into an anguished grimace.

'Not now, Theresa,' he said. 'We can't. This still isn't the right time.' He rolled away and sat up, burying his face in his hands. 'I didn't think it would happen this fast,' he muttered.

Theresa pulled down her sweater and sat up, shaken. 'Damn those Brimstones!' she cried. 'When they show up, I'm going to tear them apart!'

'No, Theresa,' Luke said, 'I don't want you to...' He stopped, listening intently. 'I thought I heard something. Do you see anything outside?'

'Oh, lord,' Theresa said, looking out the window. 'There's a black car out in front, right behind Patsy's car. It wasn't there before we...' She paused and turned her head, frowning. There was a faint, metallic sound outside the front door. 'It sounds like someone working the door lock,' she whispered. 'Luke! What are you doing?' Luke had

stood up and started toward the door. He stopped and looked back at her.

'Be quiet and stay there,' he ordered sternly, pointing a finger at her. He reached for the doorknob.

'Are you insane?' Theresa leaped to her feet just as Luke jerked the door open.

One of the Brimstone brothers lurched through the door, momentarily startled. He quickly recovered and pulled a gun from his pocket.

'Nice welcome, Thorndike,' he said coolly. 'Let's go. We're taking you for a ride.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

WITH one swift move, Theresa kicked the gun from the Brimstone's hand. Before he could recover from his surprise, she brought her hand down with all her strength in a chopping motion at the point where his neck met his shoulder. His knees buckled and he fell to the floor with an 'Ooof' sound and lay still.

'That's enough, Theresa!' Luke barked as she contemplated what further damage she might do. He flipped on the lights and knelt beside the fallen Brimstone, who was beginning to blink dazedly. 'You all right, Wilber?' he asked. When the man started to push himself up, staring around wildly, he added, 'It's OK, Wilber. The game's over.'

Theresa froze, while around her the world seemed to whirl, rearranging itself like a kaleidoscope. 'Game? What game?' she demanded shrilly.

'Oh, hello, Miss Long,' Wilber said, apparently noticing her for the first time. He rubbed his neck and grimaced. 'For a lady, you really pack some wallop.'

'What game?' Theresa demanded again. She stared at Luke in disbelief. 'Do you mean,' she said, her voice growing louder with every word, 'that there never was any real threat on your life? It was all a game?'

Luke got to his feet and helped Wilber Brimstone up. 'Just try to keep calm, love,' he said, giving Theresa a sideways glance. 'I'll explain it all when Wilber's gone.'

'Keep calm?' Theresa exploded. 'You snake! You insidious, dishonest, creepy snake! I should have known you couldn't be trusted.' Tears welling in her eyes, she stared at Luke. 'How could you?'

'Sweetheart,' Luke said, coming toward her, his arms outstretched. 'I love you. That was no illusion. I only wanted . . .'

'Don't touch me!' Theresa cried. 'Don't come near me! I hate you. I never want to see you again!' She looked frantically about. She had to get out of here, get away from Luke,

before he led her off into some other fantasy world where her mind ceased to function and her heart again betrayed her. She spotted Patsy's keys beside the telephone and her bag lying on the floor beside an azalea plant. Without another word, she picked them up and ran out the door. She heard Luke calling after her, 'Wait, Theresa! Come back!'

William Brimstone popped out of the black car. 'Where do you think you're going?' he said gruffly.

'The game's over, William,' Theresa said, shaking her head at him. 'Go ask Wilber and Luke.'

As she slipped into Patsy's flashy sports car, she saw William chugging up the walk to Luke's apartment. She was just pulling away from the kerb when she looked back and saw all three men running for the black car. A hysterical sob escaped her throat. They were going to chase her! Luke's crazy melodrama was still continuing. Well, at least she had the right car for the job, she thought grimly, feeling the powerful surge of the car as she accelerated, and the tightly controlled steering

as she took a corner at high speed. The streets were almost deserted. Every time she saw headlights appear in her rear-view mirror, she turned and then turned again, the tyres screeching in complaint at her frantic recklessness. After what seemed like a hundred turns, she looked back. She had finally lost them.

'Good lord, I wonder where I am,' Theresa muttered to herself. Nothing looked familiar. A sign indicated that she would find Interstate 10 East straight ahead. A short time later she was on the wide, deserted highway, heading into the lightening sky of early dawn.

With a heavy sigh, Theresa put the car into cruise control and leaned back, flexing her fingers which had been clenched around the steering wheel until the joints ached. She felt as if she had escaped from one unreal world into another which was even less real. Inside, she felt a terrible, aching emptiness, empty of love and devoid of tears. Around her on the outside was a luxurious car which did not belong to her, driving down a highway to nowhere. She could not keep going, but what

else could she do? What must she do next? Her mind refused to function, images of Luke flitting past her tired eyes like visions in a dream, seemingly no more real. And so she drove on, across the Lake Ponchartrain bridge, past the town of Slidell. She slowed as a huge truck pulled on ahead of her at an crossroads, then glanced in the mirror again as something bright attracted her eyes. It was the flashing lights of a police car.

The car pulled along side, and the officer motioned for her to pull over. Now what? Theresa wondered. She had not been driving too fast. She pulled off on to the shoulder of the road and stopped, then opened the window and poked her head out. The officer was approaching her very cautiously, his gun drawn.

'Step out of the car, please, with your hands up,' he said, 'and then put your hands on top of the car.'

Numbly, Theresa did as she was told. This was only fitting, she thought. The world had gone mad around her.

'Where's your identification?' the officer asked, after frisking Theresa more thoroughly than she thought necessary.

'My bag. On the seat,' she replied.

The officer eyed her suspiciously. 'Don't move,' he said, as he reached inside for her bag.

Theresa did not answer. She did not want to talk to this man. He was one of them. One of those creatures from some other planet, sent here only to bedevil her. She watched stolidly as he found her purse, opened it, saw who and what she was, and then gave her a nasty smile.

'Well, well,' he said. 'A private detective and a car thief. Very interesting. You're under arrest, Miss Long.'

So that was it, Theresa thought, as the officer read her her rights. It wasn't really very interesting or surprising. Luke had reported Patsy's car stolen so that she would be stopped. Or Patsy had. It didn't matter. She got silently into the officer's car, ignoring his comments on how quiet she was. Maybe, she thought as she leaned back and closed her

eyes, she could go to sleep and wake up to find out that this whole night had been only a bad dream.

When Theresa opened her eyes again, it was daylight and the officer was urging her from the police car. Some dream, she thought grimly as she was ushered into a large, official-looking building, put through the necessary procedures involved in being charged with car theft, and then left staring through the bars of a gaol cell. She had used her one telephone call to call Quentin and ask him to track down a good local lawyer for her. Quent, bless his heart, had assumed there was a reason for what she had done, even though she only told him that she would explain everything later. How long, she wondered, as she sat down on the narrow prison bunk and leaned her chin in her hand, would she have to be in gaol? Even now, nothing seemed quite real. *It didn't seem possible that Luke could* have played such a miserable trick on her. He had trapped her, peeled her defences away, and...

Tears started to trickle from Theresa's eyes. She wiped them away and clenched her teeth. She wasn't going to cry and make an even bigger fool of herself. That would serve no useful purpose. She was going to wait until a few days had passed, then think the whole thing over calmly and rationally. Without Luke around to bother her, she ought to be able to do that again. Meanwhile, she might as well go back to sleep and see if she could get rid of the throbbing ache that extended from her head clear to her knotted calf muscles. She curled up on the bunk and closed her eyes.

The clanking of her cell being opened awakened Theresa.

'C'mon out,' said the gaoler with a friendly smile. 'You've been sprung.'

'By whom?' Theresa asked, getting groggily to her feet and following him.

'Fellow named Thorndike,' the gaoler answered.

'Oh, no!' Theresa cried. Quent must have called him. She should have explained what had happened! She felt like running back to

the cell, but it was too late. Luke was waiting for her by the duty officer's desk, holding her bag. He said nothing, merely cocking one eyebrow at her and taking a firm hold of her arm. He still said nothing when he put her into that same black car which had pursued her the previous night. When he had taken his place behind the wheel, he looked over at her.

'Well?' he asked.

'Well, what?' Theresa snapped. 'If you mean where do I want to go, certainly not back to your apartment.'

'Don't you want to know how I found you?' Luke smiled crookedly. 'That was quite a chase last night, but I didn't expect you to head for the border.'

'I assumed that Quentin called you,' Theresa said, staring out the front window. 'Didn't you turn in the car as stolen?'

'No, Patsy did, but I didn't know it until Quentin called. I've persuaded her to drop the charges,' Luke replied.

'Wonderful,' Theresa said coldly. 'I don't know when I've been so thrilled. Take me to a hotel. Any hotel.'

'Theresa,' Luke growled, starting the car and moving into the traffic, 'I don't see how you can so completely misinterpret everything. Haven't you thought about it at all?'

'I don't want to think about it,' she replied. 'I want to forget it. I want to forget you! Where are we going?'

'Back to my apartment,' Luke answered. 'In case you've forgotten, all of your things are there. I'm not going to bring them to you somewhere else, so you'll have to come and get them. And while we're there, we're going to have a little talk. After that, if you still want to leave, you may. But I'm warning you, you'll never get rid of me. I'll follow you to the ends of the earth if I have to, until I can beat some sense into that head of yours.'

'Sense? Into my head? That would be a novelty,' Theresa said sarcastically. 'All you've ever done is knock all the sense out of it. I'm not going to let that happen to me again.'

Luke gave her a disgusted look, but said nothing more until they were back at his apartment.

'Now, then,' he said, keeping a painfully tight grip on her arm until he had deposited her in a chair by the kitchen table, 'let's see how sensible you really are. First of all, what would you do if you loved somebody desperately, but they'd sworn they never wanted to see you again? And I'm talking about the first time you said that, not last night. Would you just give up?'

'The first time? You claim you loved me desperately then?' Theresa watched Luke nod, her mouth pursed in a disbelieving line. 'I certainly wouldn't wait five years to do something about it,' she said scathingly. 'That doesn't do much for the credibility of your devotion. In fact, I think it's an out and out lie.'

'Stop that, Theresa,' Luke said warningly. 'I don't lie. I never told you that I wasn't married, and I never made any promises to you that I couldn't keep.'

'Then what took you so long?' Theresa demanded. 'Did your wife have so much on you that you were afraid she'd take everything in a divorce settlement?'

Luke leaned forward, his brows drawn together menacingly. 'Theresa, stop acting like such a shrew. I'm losing patience with you. She had nothing on me, because there was nothing to have. Sonya was an alcoholic. I stayed with her for three miserable years in the hope I could do some good. I couldn't. The divorce took a long time to arrange, because I wanted things set up so she couldn't drink and gamble away everything in a few months' time and wind up a pauper, and she wanted everything at once.'

Theresa frowned. 'Funny you never got around to telling me all that before.'

'When did you ever give me a chance?' Luke thundered. 'Besides,' he said, lowering his voice, 'it wasn't something I cared to drag you into early on. I didn't want to string you along with that old line about divorcing my wife some day, because it might not have been true. If staying would have helped Sonya, I probably would have, in spite of everything. I don't abandon people who need me.' A small spark appeared in the dark depths of his eyes. 'Which is why I won't abandon you.'

'Whatever gave you the illusion that I need you?' Theresa asked coldly. 'I was doing very well until you popped back into my life. Does the fact that you're capable of arousing me sexually add up to need in that warped mind of yours?'

Luke's lips tightened. 'I do believe we'd got past the mere issue of sex. You told me that you love me.'

'Temporary insanity,' Theresa said, trying to ignore the ache inside that remembering that moment caused. 'I got carried away by your story of the life raft. I'm a sucker for sad dog stories, too.' She pushed her chair back and stood up. 'Now, whether you like it or not, I'm going to gather up my things and get out of here.'

'All right,' Luke said with a sigh, 'but you'll be back. It would save a lot of time and trouble if you'd stay.'

'Not a chance,' Theresa said coldly. She went to find her suitcase, and then started putting her clothing into it.

'You haven't given me a chance to explain about the twins,' Luke said, leaning against

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the bedroom door-frame and watching her. 'I think you owe it to me to listen to what I have to say, since you've obviously over-reacted in entirely the wrong way.'

'I'm not interested,' Theresa said, sending him an angry glance. 'No one likes being made a fool of.'

'I'm the fool,' Luke said quietly. 'It wasn't a game, Theresa, not to me. I wanted you near me, to give us a chance to get back to what we had five years ago. Since I tend to think in stories, I thought of one which might bring you close. I thought that if you still cared about me, learning that my life was in danger would do that.'

'But you never thought about how I'd feel when I found out I'd been tricked? I don't think you know me very well, Luke. Not very well at all.' She zipped her suitcase shut. 'Call a taxi for me, please,' she said. 'I'm ready to leave.' She started for the door, but stopped when Luke did not move. For some reason, the idea of getting too close to him made her feel shaky inside, and the way he was watching her through sad, thoughtful eyes created an

uncomfortable turbulence in her heart. She set her chin and scowled, more at herself than Luke. Even after what he'd done, did her body have no more sense than that? Why in the devil couldn't it get better co-ordinated with her mind? 'Would you mind?' she snapped impatiently. 'I can't get through.'

'Don't be in such a rush,' Luke said. 'I'll take you where you want to go. I was just *thinking that things would probably have* gone better if my story hadn't climaxed so soon. It's difficult controlling the outcome when you have live actors ad libbing as they go along. I think I was generally on the right track, though. I do know you, Theresa, better than you know yourself. I know that you really do love me, but you're still very much afraid of the commitment that implies. The smallest thing makes you jump back behind your protective shield of denial. I'll just have to take things a little slower from here on.'

'You aren't going to take anything anywhere,' Theresa said, irritated that his words made even the slightest sense to her. 'If I didn't have to stay in New Orleans to try and

track down that idiot Toby McDonald, I'd be a thousand miles away from here by tomorrow.'

'Oh, yes,' Luke said, finally moving aside, 'McDonald. I'd almost forgotten about him. You never mentioned what luck you had yesterday. Did you find Carmelita?'

'None of your business,' Theresa snapped. She reached for the telephone. Luke was not going to worm his way into that affair by being helpful. She would do it alone, or not at all.

'Mmm. No luck, huh?' Luke said. He reached over and took the telephone from Theresa's hand. 'I said I'd take you wherever you're going,' he said firmly. 'But first, tell me what happened yesterday. You must have learned something. No good detective could spend four hours tramping the streets without getting some information.'

'No!' Theresa said, her chin jutting belligerently. 'It's none of your business, and it's going to stay that way.' She picked up her suitcase and edged toward the door. 'Get out

of my way, Luke. If you won't call me a taxi, I'll walk.'

'No, you won't,' Luke said, pinning her against the door with a hand on either side of her. 'And you're not going to try any karate on me, either,' he said, as her eyes narrowed dangerously. 'You don't really want to leave my poor, mangled body lying on the floor. And you do really want to have my help tracking down Toby McDonald. Now, tell me what you know. You aren't going anywhere until you do.'

Theresa glared at him, her chest rising and falling heavily from the suffocating warmth that having him so close produced. For. a moment she had the mad notion that he had some kind of supernatural power that enabled him to lure her into a vortex of emotion, like a vacuum cleaner sucking up wisps of dust. But he didn't. Not really. If she kept her head, she could neutralise his powers. Then she could be free of him once and for all.

'I won't tell you anything,' she said defiantly.

'We could be here a long time,' Luke replied. He smiled slowly, his eyes wandering down to Theresa's lips. His tongue flicked his lower lip suggestively. 'This isn't such a bad position, is it? I could kiss you.' He looked back into Theresa's eyes, devilish sparks in his own. 'But I won't. I'm not going to kiss you again for a long time. By the time I get around to it, you'll be begging me to.'

'In a pig's eye, I will,' Theresa snapped, feeling beads of perspiration break out on her upper lip. 'I'll never beg you for anything.'

Luke only smiled and changed the subject. 'Let's see. If you didn't find Carmelita, that can't mean too many different things: number one, she's not here any more and no one knows anything about her; number two, she was here but went off with McDonald to parts unknown; number three, she quit dancing to get married and raise a family, not with McDonald... Aha! I can tell by your face that that's the answer. So Carmelita's out of the picture, and God only knows where else McDonald might be. Right?'

I can't be that transparent, Theresa thought desperately, feeling another wave of supernatural-like anxiety sweeping through her. She clenched her hands, trying to regain some semblance of calm. It was only a lucky guess on Luke's part. That was all it was.

'So the next question is,' Luke went on, frowning thoughtfully, 'what is McDonald apt to be doing? He was a jazz buff, as I recall. He could just be hanging around the clubs, drinking himself into a stupor over losing Carmelita. Or he might have taken up with another dancer. Some fellows really go for that type of woman. Do you have a picture of the guy? It would help when we go around to show it to people.'

Theresa felt like screaming. 'Will you butt out?' she cried. 'I will find Mr McDonald without your help.'

Luke shook his head. 'No, you won't. In less time than it takes to tell, I can spread the word that poor Toby McDonald's wife, a cute little blonde masquerading as a detective named Theresa Long, is hot on his trail. The poor guy would do anything to keep away

from her. I'd have everyone feeling so sorry for him that no one would tell you anything. On the other hand,' he said, grinning as Theresa groaned, 'if you accept my help, I'll bet we can find him within a week.'

I will not let this get to me, Theresa told herself, fighting off another wave of desperation. Look on the bright side. If you finish the case, you can get out of here. 'Good,' she said. 'I'll be only too glad to finish the case and get back to Chicago. When do we begin?'

'That's better,' Luke said. 'One small step forward. I guess, since you're so determined to leave, I should take you to a hotel. The Royal Orleans will do. We can have some dinner there, and then start hitting the clubs. There are dozens, so it may take a while.'

Theresa opened her mouth to protest and then closed it again. Let Luke think that he was running the show. She'd find some way to give him the slip and do things her own way. Of course, Luke was right about showing the picture of Toby McDonald to people. She'd already thought of that. Too bad it was such an old picture. The dancers had said that

he was fat and balding now. You would think that someone who claimed to love her husband as much as Mrs McDonald did would have taken his picture some time in the last five years.

She let Luke take her to the Royal Orleans, but she refused to let him see her to her room.

'Wait right there,' she told him, pointing to a comfortable chair in the lobby. 'I'll be back as soon as I'm ready for dinner.' Or maybe she wouldn't. If there was some other way out...

CHAPTER EIGHT

THERESA flung her suitcase on the bed in the luxurious hotel room and then slumped down beside it. She felt exhausted. It was not, she knew, only from lack of sleep. Being near Luke Thorndike and fighting the tentacles of the web he tried to weave was exhausting. He'd kept watching her while she'd registered for her room, his lips curved into a little smile, his eyes dark and deep and warm. She had the feeling that, even though she was now alone in her room, he was still watching, which might not be such a paranoid thought. It had occurred to her that he must have had someone watching her for a long time. How else would he have known when she was going to take the train to New Orleans? It couldn't have been a coincidence, not with the Brimstone brothers on the same train. He had known about Carl Weidenkamp, too. Did he really know Carl's boss, or had some de-

tective he'd hired told him? Was Luke, in fact, the victim of some deranged fixation on her? She had once met a woman who was pursued by a man like that. She couldn't stand the sight of him, but he kept insisting that she really loved him but didn't realise it.

Her case was not exactly parallel, Theresa admitted to herself as she shook out her clothes and hung them in the closet. Luke made her furious, but it was what he had done, not the *sight* of him, she hated. She really felt a little bit sorry for him. He thought he understood her, when he really didn't understand her at all. If he'd just come to Chicago and asked her out instead of going through his ridiculous charade, things might have turned out differently. He could have explained about his wife, and she would have understood. And, in time, if he'd acted like a normal human being, she might have learned to trust him.

That was the trouble, Theresa thought with a sigh. Luke wasn't a normal human being. He was a gifted and creative writer. Were all writers as crazy as he was? If so, their wives

must have to be a very understanding lot. Maybe poor Sonya hadn't been able to take it. Maybe Luke had driven her to drink! It was a good thing for one Theresa Long that she was on to his tricks now, or she could have ended up in the same situation. Not that Luke had ever mentioned marriage.

Theresa showered and put on a severely simple black dress and matching jacket. It would keep her from standing out in a crowd, making it harder for Luke to find her. Now to find another way out of this hotel. Wouldn't Luke be surprised when he discovered she was gone! Smiling to herself at the thought, she opened the door. Her smile faded.

'You look lovely,' Luke said, from his position, leaning against the wall opposite her room. He grinned at her downcast expression. 'I was afraid you might try to sneak out on me. Of course, that thought never entered your mind, did it?'

'Oh, it did,' Theresa said icily. 'That, and several other less pleasant ways of disposing of you.' Luke's chuckle at her remark was in-

furiating. It was time he realised that she was not joking about getting away from him. Maybe if she spelled it out for him one more time, he would begin to get the picture. 'Don't be so jolly,' she said. 'I'll get rid of you yet. And if I can't shake you in New Orleans, I can cling to the thought that I'll soon be back in Chicago, without you.'

'Maybe a good dinner will help you to stop hallucinating,' Luke said, giving her another little smile. 'You seem to have forgotten that I promised you I'd follow you to the ends of the earth, and Chicago isn't even half-way there. The point is, Terry, love,' he added, as angry sparks flared in her eyes, 'that you might as well begin to accept my presence in your life. I'm not going to try any more dramatic tricks to get you there. I'll simply be there, waiting for you to stop bridling like a rambunctious horse, and admit you meant it when you said you loved me.'

'You'll be old and grey before that,' Theresa snapped.

‘So will you, my love, so will you,’ Luke replied calmly. ‘And we will have grown old together.’

There was no point in discussing that topic any further, Theresa realised grimly. Luke simply didn’t listen. She kept determinedly silent while he led her to one of the elegant restaurants in the hotel and ordered that champagne he brought, although what he thought there might be to celebrate at the moment she couldn’t imagine and was afraid to ask.

When the cork had been popped and their glasses filled, he raised his. ‘To the most beautiful woman in the world,’ he said. ‘Any moment that I can spend with her is worth celebrating with the finest champagne.’ He smiled at her across the top of his glass, and Theresa felt a strange quivering in her stomach.

That was, she thought, a beautiful thing to say, especially since she had spent the day acting like a shrew, or worse. And unfortunately, no matter what other things he might

have said or done to deceive her, she did not doubt that he meant it.

'Thank you,' she said tightly, taking a sip of her own champagne. It was, as he had said, very fine. The dinner, too, was elegant and expensive. Vowing to herself that she was going to regain the upper hand and not let herself be obligated to Luke for anything further, Theresa insisted on adding the dinner expenses to her room tab.

'The A-1 Detective Agency will pay for it,' she told Luke when he tried to protest. 'And, since you insist on taking part in my current case, you may now consider yourself one of our employees. That means you take orders from me, not the other way around.'

Luke rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'Does *that mean you're not going to try to get away* from me again?' he asked, an annoying twinkle in his eyes.

'Yes, it does,' Theresa replied. 'It also means that I am going to use you as effectively as possible. For the rest of this evening, I want you to interview as many of the show girls as you can, on the chance that one of

them has been approached recently by our Mr McDonald. I'm sure they'll be more willing to talk to you than they would to me. Meanwhile, I'm going to start checking out the bartenders and musicians in this area.'

'Who will doubtless be happier to talk to you,' Luke said drily. 'I hope you have more than one picture of McDonald. After all, he might have used a different name so that his wife couldn't trace him.'

'That's right,' Theresa agreed. 'I have only one picture, but we can fix that easily. We'll stop at the hotel desk and ask them to make a copy of it for us. I'm sure they won't mind.' When she had the copy in hand, she gave Luke the original.

'Rather a nondescript fellow, isn't he?' Luke commented, frowning at the picture of a man holding a trumpet.

'I'm afraid so,' Theresa agreed, 'but that's all his wife had. He's also several years older and heavier now. It may be more useful to mention that the trumpet used to belong to Louis Armstrong. From what his wife said, he brags about it a lot. I'll bet he couldn't

spend an evening with a girl without mentioning it.' And, she thought, she would bet he couldn't talk to anyone in one of the jazz clubs for five minutes without mentioning his trumpet.

'All right, I'll check out the girls,' Luke said, when they had once again reached Bourbon Street, 'but why don't you wait until I've finished that to start on the clubs? I'd feel better if you didn't go prowling around at night, unescorted.' He smiled beguilingly. 'Please?'

Theresa shook her head, steeling herself against the warm, cosy feeling that his concern tried to start in her heart. His kind of concern, she told herself sternly, she did not need.

'I can take care of myself,' she reminded him. 'The idea is to bring this case to a conclusion as quickly as possible. Having the two of us pursue different aspects of the case is more efficient. You can call me in the morning and tell me what you found out.'

Luke looked down at the picture, then smiled, casting a mischievous glance at

Theresa from beneath his long lashes. 'I'll come over and we'll have breakfast together,' he said. 'I may even see you later this evening. Don't get the idea that you can order me out of your life, Terry, love. It won't work.' With that, he gave her a wink and walked off, whistling to himself.

Theresa watched him for a moment, feeling strangely unsettled, then deliberately turned her back on him. Don't let him get to you, she reminded herself. Keep the upper hand. Ignore his threats. Just do your job, and do it well. She straightened her shoulders and took off at a brisk pace toward the first doorway, through which the sweet, soulful sounds of a jazz combo were floating.

She took a seat on a bar stool, and struck up a conversation with the bartender, explaining her mission. Her heart sank when he told her that someone was always claiming they had a trumpet that used to belong to Louis Armstrong.

'Or Al Hirt,' he added. 'And I suppose now that having one that belonged to Wynton Marsalis is the big thing. Poor suckers buy

some old battered thing from some guy in a dark alley. I don't know if they really believe it or just want to impress people.' He peered at Theresa's picture. 'Doesn't look like especially like anyone I've seen lately,' he said. 'But he's kind of average-looking, you know what I mean?'

'I'm afraid I do,' Theresa replied with a sigh.

'Don't get discouraged,' the bartender advised sympathetically. 'He'll turn up. Why don't you stick around and ask the boys when they finish their set? Might as well get everyone on the alert.' He grinned, showing a gold tooth in the front. 'Don't hurt to have such a pretty girl hunting for the fellow, now does it?'

Theresa waited to talk to the musicians, having to spend part of her time actively discouraging a man who came to sit next to her and wanted to buy her a drink. When she did talk to the musicians, none of them had any information about Toby McDonald. She left her card with the bartender, in case anyone

did hear of the man, and went on down the street.

It was the same story at the next club, although Theresa thought the music there was a bit better.

'I'll get to be a regular jazz connoisseur,' she muttered to herself as she left. It took an inordinate amount of time, waiting for the musicians to have a break, and then having long enough conversations with everyone so that she felt they really would call her if they found out something about Toby. At this rate, she'd be lucky to get through another two clubs before midnight. She was just gathering her wits to start into another smoke-filled café when a large, burly man with a cigar clenched between his teeth came up behind her and put an arm around her shoulders.

'Hello, cutie,' he said, peering into her face and grinning, showing teeth yellowed from his smoking habit. 'I saw you down the street. You looking for someone special to keep you company tonight?'

Theresa gave him an icy stare. 'No, I'm not,' she replied. 'I'm a private detective,

looking for a missing man. Unless your name is Toby McDonald, I'm not looking for you.'

'You're kidding me,' the man said, grinning even more broadly as Theresa shook her head. 'Hey, that's real neat, little lady. If I was missing, I sure would like you to come and find me. Why don't you just come along and have a little drink with me, and tell me all about it? I'll just bet I can help you. I read a lot of detective stories.'

'I have to talk to some people in this club right now,' Theresa said, trying to maintain her composure. She did not want to have to resort to force in order to rid herself of this pest. 'The man I'm looking for is a real jazz fan. They may have seen him.'

That statement got the man moving into the club, although Theresa would have liked to see him go another direction. He sat down next to her at the bar, breathing bourbon-laden breath in her direction, and interjecting unhelpful comments into her discussion with the bartender. He followed her when, after another unsuccessful discussion, she started to leave.

'Look, Mr...'

'Thompson. Orville Thompson,' the man furnished. 'Where to next, Theresa?' He had picked up her name when she'd told the bartender.

'Mr Thompson, I think I'll just check one more club tonight.' She looked at her watch. 'It's getting late. Don't you have a wife who's waiting for you, like Mr McDonald's poor wife is doing?' She had noticed that the man wore a wedding ring.

'Oh, no, ma'am,' Orville replied. 'My wife's dead and gone.' He held up his hand and looked at the ring. 'Darn thing's stuck on. Too tight to get off. They say they could cut it off, but somehow I feel like it's a sign, you know? Means Millie is still with me, in spirit.'

'That's...a nice thought,' Theresa said with a sigh. And she, apparently, was stuck with Orville unless she got really nasty. For the first time that evening, she began to wish that Luke was with her. She wished so even more when Orville followed her as she left the club, still none the wiser about Toby McDonald.

'I do think you ought to come and have a little nightcap with me,' Orville persisted, clutching at Theresa's arm. 'We *might* even get into something more serious. I may not look it, but I've got plenty of money. Plenty of money. Own my own garage back in Dubuque, Iowa.'

Theresa stopped and jerked her arm free. 'Mr Thompson,' she snapped, 'I have been very patient with you, but I want you to go away and leave me alone. I am not available!'

'And I've been pretty patient with you,' Orville growled, his expression suddenly threatening. He grabbed Theresa's arm again in a vice-like grip. 'Now, just you come along with me real quiet like. I want to buy you a little drink. That isn't too much to ask, is it?'

You've asked for it, Theresa thought to herself grimly, every muscle now tense and poised for action. She was mentally measuring the time to make her move, when suddenly Luke stepped in front of them.

'Let go of the lady,' he said quietly. 'She belongs to me.'

'Sez who?' Orville repeated belligerently, dropping Theresa's arm and assuming a threatening pose in front of Luke.

Oh, lord, Theresa thought, that's all I need now. Luke and Orville in a street brawl. Quickly she said, 'Orville, he is my fiancé, and I wouldn't mess with him if I were you. He's a karate champion. Maybe you've heard of him. Luke Thorndike?'

Orville dropped his clenched fists. 'Oh, yeah,' he said. 'Thorndike.' He looked over at Theresa, and then back at Luke. 'Where the hell have you been while she's been out looking for that McDonald guy? Seems you could be more help.' He scowled again at Luke and then nodded at Theresa. 'Good luck, Theresa. If I hear anything, I'll let you know.'

After he had gone, Theresa looked up at Luke. 'Where do you get that "she belongs to me" line?' she demanded. 'Couldn't you just have told Orville to let go of me without that?'

Luke smiled slowly. 'I love you, and you love me. I think that adds up to you belonging to me,' he said. 'You did look very

glad to see me.' His eyes twinkled mischievously. 'Or were you just playing hard to get with Orville?'

'Of course not,' Theresa said stiffly, her tense nerves tingling with a new and different warmth. 'But I could have taken care of Orville myself. I was just about to.'

'Theresa,' Luke caught her chin and lifted it toward him, searching her face with eyes now deeply serious, 'can't you at least admit that you were glad to see me?'

Theresa looked past Luke. Upstairs, across the street, in the light of a window behind an iron-railed balcony filled with flowers, she could see a man and woman kissing. An aching tightness made her voice almost inaudible. 'Yes, I was glad,' she replied, turning her eyes back to Luke's. When he smiled again, the ache moved to her heart. She did not even protest when he put his arm around her as they started walking down the street.

Nor did she complain when he said, 'In case you wondered, I've been watching and waiting for you since I saw Orville follow you into the last two clubs you visited. You were never in

any danger. Did you have any luck on McDonald?'

'No,' Theresa said with a sigh. 'Did you?'

'Nope. I did find out that a lot of guys think they have one of Louis Armstrong's old trumpets.'

'Me, too,' Theresa said, wondering why, at the moment, she did not even care. Was it because she was so tired, and Luke's strong arm around her made her feel so safe? Or was it that nagging little feeling somewhere inside that seemed to be trying to tell her that there was something more important to her than Toby McDonald and his trumpet?

Luke took Theresa to the door of her room. 'You look so tired, love,' he said, gently caressing her hair back from her forehead. 'Why don't you sleep in in the morning? There's not much we can do until afternoon, anyway. We could have brunch at about eleven.'

'All right,' Theresa said numbly. She had felt herself leaning more and more heavily against Luke as they walked along. Her eyes were burning from fatigue and the smoke of

the nightclubs. She gave Luke a faint smile. 'I'll see you at eleven, then. Where?'

'Right here,' Luke replied. He let one finger trace along her cheek, then follow the curve of her lips. 'Sleep well, Terry, love,' he said. He backed away. 'Goodnight. Be sure and lock your door tight.'

'Aren't...' she began, then closed her mouth, rubbed her hand across her eyes and shook her head. 'Goodnight, Luke,' she said, hurriedly opening her door and going inside. Without even taking off her shoes, she flung herself face down on her bed and clutched desperately at her pillow. What was wrong with her? She had almost asked Luke if he wasn't going to kiss her goodnight! Was it happening to her again, in spite of everything?

When Theresa awoke, she could not even remember having put on her pyjamas, and it took her several seconds to realise where she was and that the telephone was ringing.

'Hello?' *she croaked hoarsely.*

'Theresa, what's going on?' demanded Quentin's voice. 'Luke told me you got mad at him, then drove off in the neighbour's car,

and now you're staying at a hotel. Are you all right? You sound terrible.'

Theresa cleared her throat. 'Yes, I'm fine,' she answered, her mind finally beginning to function. 'Did Luke tell you why I was angry? *Am* angry?' At Quentin's negative reply, she poured out the whole story. Expecting heartfelt sympathy from her brother, she let go the tears that had not come before at Luke's treachery. Instead, he sounded almost as if he sided with Luke.

'Now, Theresa,' he said, 'I do think you're being a little melodramatic. It was rather unorthodox, but after all, it's not every woman who has a man willing to go to such lengths to get her attention. I should think you'd be flattered.'

disconsolately into space. 'Give it a few more days,' Quentin had said, 'and then come home. We can't win 'em all.' Well, she was going to win this one. And she wasn't going to let Luke Thorndike weaken her defences again. She had been too tired last night, that was all. She hadn't really wanted him to kiss her at all.

Promptly at eleven o'clock, there was a knock at her door.

'Room service,' said a familiar voice.

Frowning curiously, Theresa opened the door.

'Brunch is served, ma'am,' said Luke, entering the room, pushing a trolley before him. 'I thought it would be more pleasant to eat in privacy.' He parked the trolley next to the small table near the windows and smiled at Theresa. 'You're looking lovely, as usual,' he said. 'Blue becomes you.'

Theresa felt her cheeks grow warm. From the moment that Luke had entered the room, she had done nothing but stare at him. Why was it that she could never remember from one time to the next how incredibly handsome

he was? In a black turtle-neck sweater and grey trousers, his dark hair gleaming with highlights, he seemed to fill the room with a vibrant electricity.

'Creole omelette,' he said, removing the cover from one of the dishes with a flourish. 'Croissants,' he announced, uncovering the basket. 'Honeydew melon, orange juice, coffee.' He raised one black eyebrow. 'Theresa, are you there?'

'Oh, yes!' She blushed, then cursed herself for doing so and took a deep breath. 'It looks wonderful,' she said, 'but you shouldn't have . . .'

'I know,' Luke interrupted, 'it's less expensive to go out, but we have so much to talk about, and I don't think we'd want anyone to overhear, do you?'

'What on earth are you talking about?' Theresa demanded, taking her place at the table. 'Neither one of us found out anything yesterday to talk about.'

'Au contraire,' Luke said. He paused and looked at the croissant he was buttering with an amused smile. 'Why do I always feel like

speaking French when I'm eating one of these?' he asked, his eyes twinkling as he looked up at Theresa.

'Je ne sais pas,' she answered, unable to resist his good humour, although she could not fathom its source. 'And,' she added, 'I still don't know what this deeply secret conversation of ours is supposed to be about.'

Luke savoured a bit of croissant, took a sip of coffee, seeming to deliberately enjoy making Theresa wait for his answer. At last he leaned toward her and answered, 'Us. You wanted me to kiss you last night. You almost asked me to. I think it's time we beat a retreat to some time before the débâcle with the Brimstone brothers who, incidentally, are great admirers of yours, and started over.'

'I was tired last night,' Theresa said defensively. 'My mind wasn't working. And there's nothing that can erase what you so aptly call the débâcle of the Brimstone brothers. So there's nothing to talk about.'

'Wrong,' said Luke. 'I want you to talk about the Brimstones. Castigate me. Tell me exactly what I did wrong, and why I should

never have done it. I obviously need correction, and where else am I to get it? Just pretend that you're a psychiatrist—say, Dr Theresa Longfreud, and I am some poor, confused man named Thorny Lukewarm, who has done to Susie Mae Pickrell exactly what that dastardly Luke Thorndike did to you. Help me, Dr Longfreud. My life is in your hands.'

Theresa gave up trying to keep her twitching lips from smiling. 'Thorny Lukewarm, indeed,' she said. 'You may be thorny, but I don't think anyone would ever accuse you of being lukewarm about anything. Maybe that's one of your problems. You get an idea, and then the idea runs away with you before you think it through. Why didn't you just come to Chicago and knock on my door? I would have invited you in. You could have told me about your ex-wife. I would have understood a lot of things better then.'

Luke took a bite of his omelette and chewed it thoughtfully. 'Excellent omelette,' he said. 'Yes, doctor, I believe there's some merit in what you say,' he went on, 'and I suppose in

a year or two you might have come around to deciding that you loved me, after all. But I don't like Chicago that well, and I still don't understand exactly why what I did was so terrible. We had some excitement, some fun, and found our love much more quickly. Even more quickly than I'd hoped. There's nothing phony or deceitful about my love for you. I love you just as much here on dry land as I would on any raft. Could you only imagine loving me if I was about to die?' He raised his eyebrows quizzically at Theresa, waiting for her answer.

Theresa looked away from Luke's probing gaze. He was trying to trap her again. Not this time, he wouldn't! 'I can't imagine loving you at all,' she said stiffly.

'That's a lie, Theresa,' Luke said flatly. 'And you know it. All right, then, answer this. Why did you say you loved me, if it's completely beyond your imagination now? The only difference between then and now is the story I told you, in which case the answer to my question is yes.'

'Oh, stop it, Luke! Just stop it!' Theresa cried. She flung down her napkin and jumped up from her chair. Tears welled in her eyes. 'I don't know why I said it. I guess at the time I meant it. I thought I could trust you, but I can't. You deceived me.'

Luke came to stand in front of her. 'Tell me this, Theresa,' he said, raising her face to his with one finger, 'I thought there was a difference between the kind of deceit involved with a man who cheats on his wife or a father who deserts his family, and the kind of make-believe I engage in. Am I wrong?'

Theresa jerked her head away and rubbed at her teary cheeks. 'You always make things sound so logical. I don't know the answer. I just know how I felt.'

'But,' Luke said, putting his hands on Theresa's shoulders and then sliding them around to her back, 'you like make-believe. And I can't live without it. I'm a writer, you know. If you truly feel there's no difference, then I guess we should say goodbye, for I can't promise I'd never do anything like that again, and I don't want to make you unhappy. I

couldn't bear that.' He pulled Theresa close and laid his cheek against her hair. 'I don't want to say goodbye,' he said, a note that sounded almost like a sob in his voice.

This is it, Theresa thought, standing very still, her heart pounding erratically. This is the chance I've been waiting for to rid myself of Luke Thorndike forever. She could tell that he really meant what he said. All she had to say would be, 'Well, I guess it's goodbye, then.' But did she want to say goodbye? Standing in the circle of Luke's arms, feeling his warmth, the gentleness of his touch, was probably not the time to make such a decision. It made her think of how she felt when he kissed her, how his smile could thrill her to her very toes. Of how special she felt when she shared one of his fantasies, as if they were almost one person, adrift in a world of their own. Was she wrong to feel so hurt at his deception? Logically, she could see his point. But it was so hard to make logic change what she felt. So easy to reject all of the good along with the bad. He had, she remembered, said something about that. The easier negative.

Maybe that had been what he meant when he said he had a job to do. He had to teach her to stop looking only at the easier negative, to be able to see that there were other sides to look at. Maybe if she tried harder to count the good points...

Feeling so tightly drawn that she would shatter like a dry leaf if Luke were to squeeze her, Theresa slowly let herself lean against him. Poor darling. His heart was pounding at the sometimes frenetic pace of a jazz drummer. He was as worried as she was over what she would decide. Her arms crept around to his broad back, hard with muscular tension, and, as she tightened her grip, he tightened his.

'I love you, Theresa,' Luke murmured.

Theresa closed her eyes. If she told Luke goodbye, she would never hear that again, in his velvet voice, never feel like this again, so close and secure in his arms. A nice, calm, orderly, dull life. A life without the man she loved with such unreasoning passion that she was even now beginning to tremble with longing in the midst of her confusion. She

raised her head and saw in his eyes so clearly the loving and longing that it brought tears to her eyes.

'I love you, too, Luke,' she said huskily. 'I couldn't bear to say goodbye.'

CHAPTER NINE

TIME stood still, capturing Luke's face in an expression Theresa knew she would remember forever. There was relief, and joy, but most of all love. Then his lips found hers, recalling the hunger and passion of the last time she had told him she loved him. Every vestige of the aching tension that had been building ever since Wilber Brimstone made his unfortunate entrance into Luke's apartment vanished in a sigh of happiness. She closed her eyes and lost herself in a world of nothing but sensations. The taste of Luke's loving mouth, the strength of his passionate embrace, the solid masculinity of his body close to hers. She smiled when he drew away for a moment and smiled at her, then crushed her to him again.

'Lord, I feel so much better,' he said, nibbling his way with a path of kisses from Theresa's mouth to her ear.

'So do I,' she agreed. She angled her chin against his as he returned toward her mouth again, and laid her hand along his cheek. 'I hope I can learn to deal better with your fantasies,' she said. 'I'll try very hard. But do try not to shock me quite so much, will you? Only pleasant surprises.'

Luke smiled wryly. 'I'll do my best, but I can't guarantee the results. I would have sworn you'd find it a pleasant surprise to find that my life wasn't in danger, after all.'

'I guess it should have been,' Theresa admitted. 'I'm a slow learner.' She laced her arms beneath Luke's again and held him close. 'On the other hand, I think there are some things you're a little slow about.'

'Such as?' Luke demanded.

'Well...' Theresa looked over at her bed. 'There's a nice, comfortable bed, and we're not anticipating any visits from the Brimstones this morning.' She looked back at Luke and pressed her hips suggestively against his. 'Twice now you've told me it wasn't the right time. Maybe the third time's the charm?'

Luke took a deep breath and cleared his throat uncomfortably. 'There's something I'd better explain about that. I probably should have before, but somehow it didn't seem appropriate either time.' At Theresa's anxious look, he chuckled. 'No, Terry, love, I'm not impotent. It's just that I have what most of Earthling society would consider a weird hang-up about making love to women I'm not married to. I suppose it's my religious upbringing. That's why I could never have been the philanderer that you imagined, and never will. In your case, the flesh is certainly willing, but I wouldn't feel right about it. Of course, you did tell old Orville last night that we were engaged. So maybe if we were...'

'I also told him that you were a karate champion,' Theresa said, frowning. 'But, if that's a proposal...' A sharp little twinge of fear passed through her. She did love Luke, and certainly respected his feelings about sex outside of marriage, but marriage was such a big, permanent step.

'It is,' Luke said quickly. He smiled at Theresa's worried look. 'I know, it's a little

scary to think about, having just decided that you aren't afraid to admit that you love me, even on dry land. And I think you're very sensible to be concerned.' He took her hands in his. 'Come and sit beside me and let me tell you a story,' he said, leading her over to sit on the edge of the bed.

'More make-believe?' Theresa asked, smiling at his serious expression.

'I wish it were,' Luke said. 'This is a true story.' He took a deep breath. 'Once upon a time, there were two young people who struck unbelievable sparks off of each other the first time that they met. Nothing like that had ever happened to either of them before, and in a few days they were sure it was love. In a few more days, they decided to marry. They were both brought up to believe that sex before marriage was wrong, and it was unthinkable that they live together beforehand, so naturally there was great inducement for them to marry quickly. Which they did. After the wedding, there wasn't much money, but the young husband was perfectly happy working on his writing at all hours, and making love

to his young wife whenever they happened to be in bed at the same time. He didn't mind that she couldn't cook and didn't want children until they had more money. He didn't even notice that she grew more unhappy every day. He didn't realise that she hated never knowing when he'd want to eat. Or how much she hated that he forgot birthdays and anniversaries and left his clothes on the chairs and squeezed the toothpaste tube in the middle. She had no ambitions of her own, and didn't make friends easily. When the husband had some success and they started going to fancy parties, she was ill at ease. She accused him of flirting if he even spoke to a woman. She did find one thing, though, that made it all bearable. In fact, it turned her into a vivacious woman who couldn't resist using her newfound powers on any willing male.' He smiled sadly. 'I think you know what I mean.'

'Oh, Luke, I'm so sorry,' Theresa said, touched at the obvious sorrow the story of his unhappy marriage still caused him.

'So am I,' Luke said with a heavy sigh. 'The saddest thing of all is that, somewhere along

the way, love died. I don't want that to happen to us. That's why I think it would be best if we took some time to be sure. I have no qualms about us living together, if you don't, but I want to save sex for that wonderful time when we might want to bring children into the world.' He looked at Theresa anxiously. 'You do want children, don't you?'

'Definitely,' Theresa replied. 'At least a couple. My mother's more than ready to be a grandmother.' She flung her arms around Luke and nestled her head against his shoulder. 'I'm so glad you told me all that. It helps me understand so many things about you. I wish you'd told me sooner.'

'God knows, I wanted to,' Luke said with feeling, 'but, realistically, there hasn't been a good time to do so before now. In California, I didn't want to involve you in my problems, and here...'

'I know,' Theresa interrupted, nodding. 'I didn't give you a chance before. But I don't think we'd have the kind of problems that you and Sonya did. I work strange hours sometimes, too, though, and might not be there to

cook when you were hungry. Tell me, is it going to bother you to have a wife who's a detective? It already seems to worry you.'

'There, you see?' Luke said, gathering her close. 'Already a potential problem. Food's no problem. I can hire a cook. It's having you out alone that I don't like. I think I could handle it if you worked with a partner.'

'That,' Theresa said, kissing his chin, 'could be arranged. Which reminds me, partner, what are we going to do about Toby McDonald and his phony Louis Armstrong trumpet? Have you exhausted the supply of exotic dancers yet?'

'Not quite,' Luke replied. 'Shall we get to work?' He kissed Theresa's upturned nose. 'I'm afraid if we stay here much longer you'll undermine all of my good intentions.'

'Heaven forbid,' Theresa said teasingly. 'Let's check the last of the lovelies out, and then start on some of the smaller clubs. I have an idea that if Toby's settled in down here, he might frequent someplace more quiet than Bourbon Street.'

'Good idea,' Luke agreed. 'There's one other thing to check out first, though.'

'What's that?'

'You. Out of this hotel. No use wasting any more of A-1's money, is there?'

Theresa shook her head, and then giggled. 'Poor Quent. He's going to think I've lost my mind.'

'You have,' Luke said. 'And don't try to find it. I'm going to hide it, so that you'll never be able to escape me.'

Theresa moved back to Luke's apartment, this time winning the argument over where she would sleep.

'I don't think my upbringing provided me with the fortitude that yours gave you,' she told Luke, 'and I know a hold that would make you my helpless victim if I went berserk from frustration.'

Several days of searching for Toby McDonald proved fruitless, at last beginning to put a damper on the warm glow that Theresa felt at being continually blessed by the love that Luke now so freely showed her.

Their only unexpected find had been the Brimstone brothers, behind the bar in a café near the river.

'We own part of this place,' William explained with a chuckle at Luke and Theresa's exclamations of surprise. 'Had a little luck in a poker game the night after we left you.'

'Don't know how long we'll stay here,' Wilber joined in, 'but so far we like it.'

When Theresa showed them Toby McDonald's picture, Wilber made a comment that she thought might prove helpful, but had so far produced nothing.

'Look how that guy's holding that trumpet,' he had remarked. 'He's holding it right. For playing it, I mean. I used to play a little myself, so I know.'

'Do you suppose,' Theresa had said later to Luke, 'that Toby might have tried to get work as a trumpet player? He didn't have all that much money, and once he got to New Orleans he apparently stopped using his credit cards.'

Luke shrugged. 'I don't know. It seems to me we'd have heard of any new trumpet players in the places where we've been.'

'I know.' Theresa chewed her lip thoughtfully. 'Try this scenario. You come down here, hoping to find your lady love, and she isn't here any more. All you've got is your wonderful trumpet and a love of jazz. You know you aren't good enough for the big time, so what do you do? My guess is you head for some tiny place way out in the sticks where you can make a few dollars and maybe get your meals free.'

'Sounds possible,' Luke replied. 'Or you get yourself a shack down by the bayou, a case of whisky, and wile away the hours playing for the alligators. Shall we start interviewing alligators to see if they've heard any bad trumpet-playing lately?'

'Oh, do be serious,' Theresa grumbled. 'Quent says I only have a couple more days to work on the case, and I hate to quit a loser. He couldn't get hold of Mrs McDonald to tell her what we did find out about Carmelita, and

see if she wants us to continue. She's apparently gone on vacation.'

'That's funny,' Luke said. 'I thought...'

'What?'

Luke shrugged. 'Nothing. I just thought the woman would be glued to her telephone, waiting for you to call.'

'You would think she'd at least let us know where she was going, wouldn't you?' Theresa agreed.

Theresa was disconsolately poking at her breakfast on the last day on which she was officially on the McDonald case, when Luke suddenly thrust his newspaper in front of her.

'Look there,' he said, pointing to an advertisement. 'Maybe we should check that out tonight.'

'"Amateur night at Crawdaddy's",' Theresa read. '"Prizes for the best solo and combo performances. Talent scouts guaranteed to be in the audience."' She sighed. 'It's worth a try.'

'Come on, precious,' Luke said, giving her shoulders a squeeze. 'Look on the bright side. Even if we don't find McDonald there, we

might get to hear the next Louis Armstrong give his première performance.'

'Or get to hear a lot of bad jazz,' Theresa said drily.

She tried to feel optimistic, but finally took a long walk to the French market so that she would not be hanging around the apartment looking gloomy while Luke was working on some writing he had recently started. When at last they arrived at Crawdaddy's, she was still depressed.

'I haven't seen you smile all day,' Luke complained. 'Are you sure it's that important that you find Toby McDonald? It's pretty obvious he doesn't want to be found.'

Theresa shook her head. 'No, I'm not sure. While I was walking today, I was thinking about that. I'm not sure I'm cut out for the detective business. I think all I want to do is get married so we can start having those children we were talking about.' She did smile at the radiant smile with which Luke greeted her statement. 'You like that idea?' she asked.

'Love it,' Luke said. 'But I don't think you should quit a loser. Besides, you may just be

thinking that way because you're so down about this case. Come on, now, think positively. Say to yourself, Toby McDonald is sure to be here tonight. This is just the kind of place he'd be.'

'It is the kind of place I'd imagine he would be,' Theresa said, looking around. 'I wonder if they have a list of the contestants?'

'I'll see,' Luke replied. He returned shortly with a piece of paper in his hand. 'This is all they have,' he said, 'but the manager said that there are always more show up during the evening. Besides, he might be using a different name.'

'This could be a long night,' Theresa sighed. Toby McDonald's name was not on the list. Would she even recognise the man if he had changed his name?

When the contestants began playing, each gave his name and chatted briefly with the master of ceremonies about his background. Most were quite young, eager to launch their careers. They exhibited a wide range of talent. Some were very good, some dreadful. Theresa and Luke were soon caught up in the audi-

ence's loud and spontaneous response to the players. They were still applauding an especially good saxaphone soloist, when a short, balding man got up from a table, walked up to the centre of the little stage and raised his trumpet. The master of ceremonies looked startled.

'Wait a minute, mister,' he said, moving towards the man as if to stop him. One long, sweet note, and both he and the audience fell silent. Theresa stared in disbelief, her heart pounding wildly.

'It's him,' she gasped, clutching at Luke's arm. 'Isn't it? Am I imagining things? And he's wonderful. Just wonderful.'

'That he is,' Luke agreed, staring intently at the man. He looked over at Theresa and smiled. 'I think you've found your man.'

When the man had finished playing the *St Louis Blues*, the audience would not let him go, in spite of the efforts of the master of ceremonies to get them to permit the next contestant to play. Finally, the man played a short, rousing version of *When The Saints Go Marching In*, bowed, and left the stage.

'Your name, sir,' called the master of ceremonies. 'You didn't give your name.'

'McDonald,' the man replied. 'Tobias McDonald.'

'It *is* him!' Theresa cried, smiling triumphantly at Luke.

'I never doubted it,' Luke replied, reaching over to squeeze her hand. 'Are you going to talk to him now?'

Theresa shook her head. 'Unless he starts to leave, I'll wait until the contest is over. He's sure to win a prize. I'd hate to spoil that for him. It may not make him very happy to hear that Josephine is on his trail.'

But, she was surprised to learn later, after Toby McDonald had indeed collected a prize and an offer of a regular job, he was not unhappy at all to hear that Josephine still loved him and wanted him back.

'If she wants to come down here and live with me, that's fine with me,' he said. 'I just decided it was time to do something I'd always wanted to do, before I got any older. I've wanted to play the trumpet since I was a wee little boy.' He smiled happily. 'I sure never

thought I'd really make it. Do you think Josephine will want to come to New Orleans?'

'I certainly hope so,' Theresa said. She handed Toby the letter she had brought. 'Maybe this will give you a clue.'

Toby read the letter, his smile getting broader with each line he read. 'I'll be darned,' he said. 'I think she really loves me. I'll call her first thing in the morning.' The fact that his wife had been away did not concern him. 'She goes to visit her sister a lot,' he said. 'I'll call her there if she isn't at home.'

'How wonderful to have a happy ending,' Theresa said as she and Luke drove home. 'It was worth all of the trouble in the end, wasn't it?'

'Indeed it was,' Luke agreed. He smiled knowingly at Theresa. 'And now I'll bet you don't want to stop being a detective, after all.'

'Probably not,' Theresa admitted. 'I'll have to figure out how to work around raising a family. If I open my own agency in Hollywood and get some good people working for me, I should be able to do that. What do you think?'

Luke reached over and took Theresa's hand in his. 'I think you should do whatever will make you happy. Sometimes I disappear into my study for days at a time when I'm writing, and I don't think you would be happy unless you had a career of your own.'

Theresa squeezed Luke's hand and leaned her head against his shoulder. They were talking now as if they really were going to get married very soon. And, she thought, she was almost ready to tell Luke yes. Later, as she lay on her bed in her little Garden of Eden, basking in the afterglow of Luke's goodnight kiss, she decided that there was no reason to wait any longer to tell him that she thought they should get married. In the morning, she would tell him. She would send him off on an errand, make him a very special breakfast, and then tell him.

She was almost bursting with excitement the next morning, but she pretended to be unhappy about the fact that they had no fresh croissants for breakfast.

'Would you mind getting some?' she entreated, giving Luke her sweetest smile. 'I'm feeling very French this morning.'

'Certainement, ma chérie,' Luke replied. *'Veux-tu un melon aussi?'*

'Don't swamp me with your French,' Theresa giggled. 'If that means, do I want a melon, the answer is yes.'

'I will return *tout de suite*, my sweet,' Luke said, giving Theresa a quick kiss, *'avec des croissants et le melon.'*

When Luke had left, Theresa put on a lovely blue silk kimono that he had given her, then hurried to the kitchen, where she set the little table with a pretty lavender cloth, and Harry's finest china. She had just begun to whip the eggs for an omelette when the telephone rang.

'What a time for the phone to ring,' she grumbled, turning off the mixer. 'Hello!' she snapped crossly into the receiver. 'Oh, sorry, Quent. I was just in the middle of making an omelette,' she added when her brother commented on her grouchy tones.

'Well, I have some news that's apt to make you even grouchier,' he said. 'It's about the McDonald case.'

'Grouchy?' Theresa said. 'Why? I was going to call you in a little while and tell you the good news. I found Toby McDonald last night, playing the trumpet in an amateur contest. He's terrific.'

'Whoever he is, he may well be a terrific trumpet player,' Quent said drily. 'Brace yourself, Theresa. There are no Mr and Mrs Toby McDonald. Apparently they were both part of some more of Luke's games.'

Theresa stared at the receiver. Her hand started to shake. 'More . . . of Luke's games?' she repeated hoarsely.

'That's right. I found out . . . Theresa?' Quentin Long called his sister's name several times, but got no reply. The telephone had dropped from her shaking fingers.

'Oh, no!' Theresa cried, tears starting to stream down her cheeks. 'No!' she screamed. It couldn't be. Luke wouldn't have, he couldn't have done such a thing! But Quent wouldn't lie. It must be true. She hadn't found

Toby McDonald at all. There was no happy ending to all of her work. It was nothing but another stupid, deceitful fraud that robbed her of all the pride she had taken in her success!

'I don't want to see him,' she cried aloud. 'I don't ever want to see that man again!' This time she was getting away from him and she would never come back. Never! She had to hurry. She ran into the bathroom, flung off her kimono, then pulled on jeans and a sweat-shirt. Seeing her lipstick lying on the counter gave her an idea. She'd leave Luke a message he'd understand. She opened the lipstick and scrawled on the mirror, 'You louse! I hope you rot in hell!' Then she grabbed up her bag and ran out of the apartment, not caring which way she went as long as it was not where Luke Thorndike would be.

CHAPTER TEN

THERESA ran, tears still streaming down her cheeks, until she could run no more, and then jogged along, wiping her eyes from time to time on her sleeve. She dodged from one street to another, finally ending up in front of the Cabildo on Jackson Square. Luke would never think of looking for her in there, she thought, and went into the old building, joining a group who were taking a tour of the historic place which, the guide told them, had housed the likes of Jean LaFitte, the pirate, and the Marquis de La Fayette. Theresa scarcely heard, only dimly aware of her surroundings. All she could think, over and over, was, What shall I do? Dear God, what shall I do now?

She abandoned the group and slumped down on a bench on the second floor of the Cabildo. She buried her face in her hands,

fighting down waves of nausea. The heat of her anger had faded. Nothing seemed to matter any more. Everything that had been beautiful and warm was now ugly and cold. She was alone again. Oh, God, she felt so alone! Would she ever feel happy again? Would she ever laugh? Would there ever be anyone like Luke to laugh with?

A heavy hand descending on Theresa's shoulder startled her so that she almost jumped out of her skin.

'Whoa, there!' said a raspy voice. 'Sorry, Theresa. I thought that was you. You OK?'

Theresa raised her head, staring at the familiar face of Orville Thompson peering into hers, his forehead serrated into a worried frown. 'Hello, Orville,' she said dully. 'No, I'm not OK.'

'Lovers' quarrel?' he asked, sitting down beside her.

'Not exactly,' Theresa replied. 'Worse than

Orville clucked sympathetically. 'That's too bad. Mighty fine-looking young man, that Thorndike fellow. Want to tell me about it?'

Theresa shook her head. 'It's too complicated,' she said. 'It's all over, that's all.' Hearing herself speak those words brought forth a new flood of tears.

'Now, now, don't be so sure,' Orville said, patting her shoulder anxiously. 'Millie and me, we had some terrible fights when we were engaged, even when we were first married. Seems like it takes a while for two people to get adjusted, you know. Kind of like getting a new team of horses used to each other. You just take some time to think about things and then talk it over between you. It'll work out.'

'We've tried that before,' Theresa sobbed. 'It didn't help.'

'Someone tell you you only got so many tries?' Orville asked, peering into her face again.

'I don't want any more,' Theresa said stubbornly. 'I think I'd better just go home to Chicago.'

Orville shook his head. 'That won't fix anything,' he said. 'You'll no more'n get there and you'll change your mind.'

'No, I won't,' Theresa replied, frowning. She hiccuped loudly. 'Excuse me.'

'I'd wait until tomorrow, anyway,' Orville said. 'Don't rush off. Say, did you ever find that McDonald fellow?'

Those words sent a dagger of pain through Theresa's heart. 'There wasn't any McDonald fellow,' she said faintly. 'It was a hoax.'

'Well, how about that?' Orville said, shaking his head. 'You must run into some strange people in your business. Course, I do in mine, too. That's just life, I guess. Well, I've got to be going. Heading back to Dubuque today.' He stood up and looked out the windows. 'Back up the *Mississippi*. Same good old river at Dubuque as right out there.' He pointed across Jackson Square, then turned to Theresa. 'You know, Theresa,' he said, 'when Millie and I used to fight I'd go for a long walk along the river. It kind of helped me get things straight in my head. I'd

look at all of that water, flowing on and on, forever and ever, and I'd feel kind of small. Pretty soon whatever we had our fight about didn't look so big, either. Maybe you ought to take a walk along the Mississippi, too.'

Theresa gave him a wavy smile. He was really a very nice man after all. 'Thanks, Orville. I might just try that. Have a good trip home.'

Orville nodded. 'It'll be OK. Kind of lonesome without Millie. She's only been gone a year, and I'm not used to it yet. Don't know quite how to act.' He gave Theresa an embarrassed smile. 'I guess you know about that,' he said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a card. 'Let me know how things turn out for you, will you? I'd like to know.'

'I will,' Theresa promised, taking his card. She watched him go, then looked down at the card. 'Thompson's Garage and Café, Dubuque, Iowa,' she read, 'Orville and Millie Thompson, Proprietors.' Tears blurred her eyes once again. Orville had spent a lifetime with his Millie at his side, and she couldn't

even get along with Luke for a few days. Was it really all Luke's fault, or was something wrong with her? She stood up and looked out the windows, then hurried down the stairs and across Jackson Square to the river.

Theresa climbed the ramp to the Moonwalk overlooking the Mississippi River and sat down on a bench. A freighter was passing, heading out to sea, and she watched it until it was out of sight past a bend in the river. Luke, she knew, would wonder where it was going, what it was carrying, and then make up some fanciful story about it. For the life of her, she couldn't think of anything clever at all. It was only an ordinary ship, carrying a prosaic load of grain or cotton to a regular destination. Without Luke, life was very dull and predictable. Maybe that was better. Theresa Long, she thought sadly, did not seem able to cope with anything that turned her predictions upside-down.

A young couple came on to the Moonwalk, so wrapped up in each other that they might as well have been in a closet. Theresa watched

them nuzzling each other for a few minutes, and then got up and hurried back down the ramp, feeling close to tears again. She thrust her hands into her pockets and started walking along the street, hoping to find a place where she could watch the river without a reminder of blossoming love. At the foot of Canal Street she found such a place. An old-fashioned river-boat with a huge stern wheel was docked there, a sign inviting tourists to see New Orleans from the river. That, Theresa thought, was a perfect idea. If Luke was looking for her, he would never find her there, and she could watch the river to her heart's content, and see if it would bring her the same peace of mind it had brought to Orville Thompson.

She purchased a ticket and got on board, going to the top deck where she could stand at the rail and look out over the passing scene. As soon as the boat was under way, she knew she had made a good decision. Instead of watching the sights of New Orleans, she went to the stern and watched the paddle wheel

churning the water, soothed by the wind in her hair and the slow, steady rhythm of the turning wheel.

By the time the boat returned to its dock, she had made another decision. While she loved Luke and always would, she could not marry him. It wouldn't be fair. Luke deserved someone better than she, someone who would not panic when he turned her life temporarily upside-down. Someone who could really learn to look at more than one side of a question before she reacted. It was obvious, when she thought about it, that the McDonald hoax was only another part of Luke's plan to win her back. He had meant no harm, had had no desire to hurt her. But she...she had never stopped to think until now. If it hadn't been for Orville Thompson, she might never have done so. Now, there was only one thing for her to do. She would return to Luke's apartment to get her things and to tell him goodbye. And to apologise for her hastily scrawled message.

She retraced her steps to Jackson Square, standing for a few minutes in the centre by the statue of Andrew Jackson, trying to get herself in the proper frame of mind for what she must do. All around the square were reminders of the past, and of people who had plunged ahead when their world turned upside-down and made historic victories of apparent disasters. Luke needed someone of that calibre by his side, not someone who saw only the easier negative every time.

'Thanks, Andrew,' Theresa said to the famous general, later President, astride his rearing horse. She started walking briskly, heading toward Luke's apartment.

She had not gone far when she felt a prickling sensation in the back of her neck. Someone was following her. She quickened her pace, trying to catch a glimpse of who it might be in the windows of the shops she passed. One was finally angled properly to mirror those behind her. She paused for a second. Coming along the pavement behind her were the Brimstone brothers.

How silly of me, she thought. They were no threat any more. She waited and then welcomed them with a smile.

'Hello, Wilber and William,' she said. 'How's your business going?'

Neither twin smiled. Instead, each took hold of one of Theresa's arms.

'Business is OK,' Wilber said, 'but we have something in mind to make us a little extra money. You come along with us and we'll explain what we mean.'

'Don't scream,' William said, poking something hard into Theresa's ribs.

'Is this some more of Luke's funny business?' Theresa demanded. 'Because if it is...'

'It isn't,' Wilber replied. 'This is our business.'

The twins hustled Theresa along until they came to a doorway, which opened on to stairs leading to the second floor of an old, ornate building with a wrought-iron balcony overlooking the street. At the top they paused, while Wilber opened the door to an

apartment. They propelled Theresa across the room and deposited her on a chair. William quickly tied her hands and feet, while she glowered at them silently.

'Now, then,' Wilber said, drawing up a chair in front of her, 'you listen to me, and stop frowning like that. No one's going to hurt you, and you're going to come out of this a lot better than you are right now.'

'Meaning what?' Theresa asked coldly.

'Meaning you're going to end up back with Luke, like you oughta be, instead of running around like a squawking hen who's had her tail feathers stepped on.'

'I thought you said Luke didn't put you up to this,' Theresa said. 'It's pretty obvious that he did.'

William shook his head. 'No, ma'am. Luke came into our bar this afternoon and told us a lot of things while he was drinking a little too much. See, when he saw the telephone off the hook and saw your message, he kind of figured what had happened, so he called your

brother and found out he was right. I don't think I ever saw a man so shook up.'

Tears came to Theresa's eyes and trickled down her cheeks. 'I was going back to tell him I'm sorry,' she said.

'I don't *think* that's what he wants to hear,' said Wilber.

'What do you mean?'

'He's pretty well convinced that you *don't* really love him,' Wilber replied.

'But I do!' Theresa cried. 'It's just that... I'm not good enough for him.'

Wilber and William looked at each other. 'That might be,' William said, 'but you're the one he wants. At least, it sure seemed that way at first. Then, after a while, he started talking like he wasn't so sure. But we decided he probably didn't mean that part, it was just the bourbon talking, so that's when we took him home and made up our plan.'

'What plan?' Theresa demanded.

The twins smiled at each other.

'Just listen. You'll see,' Wilber replied as William went to the telephone.

'Hello, Thorndike?' William said a few moments later. 'How you feeling? That's good. Say, I've got a little proposition for you. We've got Theresa here. If you can come up with ten grand in a couple of hours, you can have her back. Otherwise, we might make her disappear kind of permanently.'

'He won't believe that,' Theresa said while William listened to Luke's reply. 'You two aren't killers.'

'Don't be too sure,' Wilber said smugly, with a leer that gave Theresa a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. 'We've done some pretty shady stuff in the past.'

'OK,' William said at last. 'We'll bring her right over.' He hung up the phone and grinned at his brother. 'He's gonna write us a cheque. I think I trust him, don't you?'

'Sure,' Wilber agreed.

'This,' Theresa said, as Wilber untied her, 'is the phoniest set-up I ever saw. Extortionists don't take cheques. Why don't you just admit that Luke told you he'd pay you to help find me and then put me through this

charade? I'm getting used to it now. It doesn't bother me in the slightest.'

William shook his head. 'The condition he was in when we took him home, he couldn't think up anything like this. I was afraid he wouldn't be able to figure out what I was talking about, but he sounds a little better now. Come on, let's get going.'

During the short walk to Luke's apartment, the twins kept a firm grip on Theresa, even though she insisted she would not run away. They were, she decided, determined to keep pretending, in spite of the fact that she knew what they were doing. Poor Luke. He must have had a miserable day. Even worse than hers. And it was all her fault. Now, if she told him she was leaving... She blinked back fresh tears. Somehow when she made her decision she hadn't pictured him drowning his sorrows in the Brimstones' bar, if that was really true.

When Luke answered Wilber's brisk knock, she could see that it was. He looked haggard, his eyes red and puffy. He eyed

warily, as the twins, still holding her firmly, escorted her into his living-room.

'Signed, sealed, and delivered as promised,' William said.

Luke nodded and held out a cheque. 'Turn her loose,' he said quietly, as William took the cheque from him and then handed it to Wilber, 'and then get out of here. I don't think much of people who turn on a friend when he's down.'

'One more thing, first,' Wilber said, thrusting Theresa toward Luke. 'We want to see you kiss her.'

Theresa stared at Luke, who looked startled by the request. Luke looked at her for a moment and then back at Wilber. 'I'm not sure she wants me to,' he said, his expression drawn and unhappy.

His obvious misery was too much for Theresa. 'Yes, I do!' she cried, throwing her arms around him and looking up into his dear face, her eyes misty. 'If you want to,' she added in a faint voice, as he looked at her doubtfully. 'I know I don't deserve it.'

Very slowly, Luke's arms encircled Theresa, almost as if he thought she were too fragile to touch. Then, as his head bent toward her and she smiled, they crushed her to him. His mouth found hers, tentative at first, and then with increasing pressure as he felt Theresa respond.

At the first moment that Luke's lips touched hers, Theresa knew that she could never tell him goodbye. She might not deserve him, but she could try, and she had learned one very important lesson that day. Having Luke happy was more important to her than anything else in the world. If he still loved her and wanted to marry her, she was his.

For a long time, Luke and Theresa clung to each other, oblivious to the presence of the Brimstone brothers. At last Luke raised his head and smiled crookedly at Theresa. 'Do you think that will satisfy them?' he asked.

Theresa looked back at the twins, who were smiling happily.

'That's more like it,' William said. 'When are you two going to get married? We'd like to be there.'

'As soon as the law allows,' Theresa replied, 'if Luke still wants me.' She held her breath, waiting for Luke's reply.

He smiled slowly. 'Do I ever,' he replied, giving her a bone-crushing hug. Then he frowned at the Brimstones. 'I don't know if we ought to invite you or not. I'm grateful to you for bringing her back, but...' he smiled at Theresa again, 'I think she might have come back on her own.'

Wilber chuckled and handed the cheque back to William, who calmly tore it up and gave the pieces to Luke.

'We just wanted to see this all turned out right,' William said. 'See, it's this way,' he added, grinning at Theresa's puzzled look. 'When we met Luke back in Hollywood, he told us how much he loved you, and then he told us about the story he made up about how he might get you to marry him. He only had one guy who was supposed to be after him in

that story, but we talked him into letting us do it because we kind of liked the idea of being in on something like that.' He chuckled. 'I guess we're a lot more romantic about things than we look, because when Luke told us he thought it had all fallen apart we couldn't stand it. We wanted him to have the happy ending like he'd planned. Maybe you'd have come back, but we wanted to be sure.'

Theresa looked up at Luke, whose eyes were now sparkling with their old devilish fires as he grinned at William. 'I never saw two more unlikely cupids,' he said, 'but we'll be honoured if you'll come to our wedding. We'll let you know as soon as things are set.'

After the twins had left, Luke returned to Theresa's side, his expression now so sober that she feared he had only pretended to want to marry her to please the Brimstones. She was even more worried when he took a tight hold of her hand and frowned at her.

'Young lady,' he said, turning and pulling her swiftly along behind him through the bedroom, and into the mirrored bath, 'we

have some serious talking to do. I've been to hell and back today.' He pointed at Theresa's message on the mirrors. 'That,' he said sternly, 'is inexcusable. From now on, yell at me if you want to and call me names, but don't write things on the walls and then run away so that I can't defend myself.'

'Yes, sir,' Theresa replied meekly, relieved that there was still going to be a 'from now on'. 'What I did was awful and stupid. You must think I'll never get any sense. Let me get something to clean that off with.'

'Just leave it for now,' Luke said, shaking his head. 'Maybe it will help remind you not to do it again.'

'Oh, I won't,' Theresa said earnestly. 'I promise. I'll stop and think why you did something, instead. I'm still not exactly sure why you did that trick with the McDonalds, but...' she smiled tentatively at Luke's still stern expression, 'I'm sure it has something to do with that story William was talking about.'

'Only partly,' Luke replied. He studied Theresa's face, his own softening, his slow, beautiful smile gradually spreading its light into the dark depths of his eyes. 'Let's get comfortable. I plan to do a lot of talking, and then...' he swept Theresa into his arms and placed a quick kiss on her lips, 'I plan to invent a new maxim: if the third time fails, the fourth time will definitely be the charmed one.' With that, he carried Theresa into the bedroom, and set her carefully down on the huge, round bed. While she watched, her pulse quickening at the knowledge that this remarkable man was going to be truly hers in spite of everything, he flung off his shirt and then stretched out beside her and took her into his arms again. 'Comfortable?' he asked.

'Comfortable?' Theresa repeated dreamily. 'Oh, Luke, if only you knew how terrible I've felt all day and how wonderful I feel now.' She caressed his dark hair back from his forehead gently. 'That was a silly thing to say. You do know, don't you?' she answered her own question.

Luke nodded. 'I was afraid we might never be here again.' He kissed Theresa's cheek, then rubbed his own cheek against hers. 'I don't know if I could have stood that,' he said huskily. 'I love you so very much. The only reason I invented a Toby McDonald was to make you happy. I knew how much it meant to you to find him, and you were getting so discouraged.'

'You mean,' Theresa said, 'that there wasn't supposed to be any Toby McDonald in your story? I don't understand. Why don't you start at the beginning and tell me everything?' She lifted her head so that she could see Luke's face, and the love she saw there made her forget her question and press her lips to his in a kiss that she could scarcely bear to end.

At last Luke framed her face with his hands and whispered, his mouth still touching hers. 'There's someone watching us.'

'There is?' Theresa drew back, startled, and looked around, then made a face as Luke chuckled and pointed toward the mirror

overhead. 'Oh, them,' she said. 'They don't count.'

'Sure they do,' Luke replied. 'That's Thorny Lukewarm and Dr Theresa Longfreud again. They're really the sex inspectors from the planet Libido, here to see if the fourth time really is the charm. If we don't get this talking nonsense over with, they're apt to become very upset and unleash some of those evil weapons that Libido is famous for.'

'Heaven forbid,' Theresa said, giggling. The sound of her own laughter made her suddenly realise how long it seemed since she had last felt like laughing. Without Luke, she wondered if she ever would have. 'Oh, Luke,' she said, burying her face against his neck, 'I love you so much. It didn't take me long today to realise how wrong I'd been. But I almost made a terrible mistake. I might not have come back to stay. I thought you deserved someone better. I still think maybe you do, but if you can stand me, I think I've learned a little more again. Maybe some day soon I

won't panic if I find out something I thought was real was only a game.'

'And maybe,' Luke said wryly, 'I'll learn which kind of games not to play. Although I was sort of stuck with Toby after I'd started you searching for him in the first place. You see, the first thing my story required was to get you to New Orleans, since I was planning to be here, so I invented Josephine McDonald and her missing husband, and hired an actress I used to know in California, but who now lives in Chicago, to take the part of Josephine. I didn't plan on having you find Toby. I wanted to sweep you off your feet again and have you forget all about him after a while. When I saw that wasn't going to work out, I adjusted the story accordingly. That was the way the whole story worked, you see. The outline was there, but we had several options, depending on what actually happened. For instance, I didn't know whether you'd fly or take the train.'

'I wondered about that,' Theresa exclaimed. 'I thought you must have had a de-

tective watching me to find out. All you really needed was to talk to Josephine, wasn't it?'

'That's right. And to do a little sleight of hand with some tickets to get one that looked as if it was for the same room as you had. I didn't know if the opportunity would present itself for the Brimstones to get their message across on the train, either. If they didn't, they'd have done it in some bar or restaurant after you got here. We weren't sure exactly how long to string out their threat, or what form their attack would take. We had a few surprises, too.' Luke paused and chuckled. 'I knew you'd probably learned some self-defence in order to become a private investigator, but I didn't realise what a dynamo you are. Wilber complained afterwards that, if he'd known, he wasn't sure he'd have taken the job. And, of course, there was that crazy grapefruit. I didn't know whether the twins had decided to ad lib something new or there really was someone after me.' He hugged Theresa tightly. 'That night turned out better

than it would have without the grapefruit, didn't it?'

'Mmm,' Theresa replied, sighing as Luke insinuated his hand beneath her sweatshirt. 'Wait a minute,' she said. She sat up and pulled the sweatshirt off. 'There, that's better. I like the way you feel, my love.' She pressed against Luke suggestively.

Luke cleared his throat and placed his hand on Theresa's breast. 'Now, as I was saying...what was I saying?'

Theresa giggled again, her heart now so light that she felt she might float into space with Luke beside her. 'Something about what you'd planned and what you didn't plan,' she replied. 'I hope you didn't plan on my winding up in gaol for car theft, or was Patsy Muffett leaving her keys here and her car out in front part of your plan?'

Luke slid a mischievous glance from beneath his long lashes. 'Maybe I'll just let you wonder about that. Ouch!' as Theresa pinched him. 'Don't hit me,' he said, pre-

tending fear. 'I confess. That was a stroke of luck.'

'Luck?' Theresa scowled, and then burst out laughing at the devilment in Luke's eyes. 'Luke Thorndike, you are terrible,' she said. 'Go on, finish your blasted story. Dr Longfreud is getting restless.'

'And Thorny is anything but lukewarm,' Luke replied, pulling Theresa closer to him and demonstrating with a suggestive movement of his hips against hers. 'There's not much more to tell. The plan was to have you find out about the threat. If you hadn't found out on the train and moved right in, you'd have known where to find me and come rushing to my side. I'd woo you while the Brimstones stalked me. Eventually they'd make their move, which would be serious enough to scare you into realising that you loved me but would somehow be bungled so that you wouldn't call the police. I didn't count on you falling under my spell quite so fast.' He grinned and kissed the tip of Theresa's nose. 'And I definitely didn't think

you'd be angry to find out I wasn't really in danger. I guess I'm condemned to join that legion of men who admit that they'll never really understand a woman's mind.'

'Hmph,' Theresa said, toying with the dark curls of hair on Luke's chest. 'I don't think you're any easier to understand. How on earth did you ever come up with the idea of writing a story for us to play out?'

'A rather famous fellow gave me the thought,' Luke replied. 'Will Shakespeare. Remember the lines from *As You Like It*? "All the world's a stage. And all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts." Ignoring the profound wisdom that follows, I thought to myself one day that I didn't like the part I was assigned or the part you were playing, so far away from me. I'd heard about Carl Weidenkamp. At first, I thought that if you'd found the right man I shouldn't interfere. Then I decided to check him out, and see if I thought he was the right man for you.' Luke paused and

grinned devilishly. 'Once I'd met him, there was no way I could let you waste your life on that dullard. I decided to do some rewriting of both our scripts.'

'That was rather presumptuous of you,' Theresa said teasingly. 'I don't think I appreciate your lack of confidence in my judgement.'

Luke chuckled. 'I was pretty confident that once we were together again you'd see the light. Naturally, I was delighted that you saw it without my help. That led me to hope that maybe you'd learned enough about men in five years to be over being angry with me. If you'd welcomed me with open arms, I'd never have used the Brimstone brothers at all. Of course, that would have spoiled my story. Do you think you'd have liked it better that way?'

'I don't know,' Theresa said thoughtfully. 'I can't even imagine it happening that way. A happy ending with no story. Would you have liked it better?'

'I don't think so,' Luke replied. 'We've had some bad moments, but I think we've both

learned a lot about each other. That can't help but be a good thing.'

'I think you're right about that,' Theresa said, leaning across Luke and smiling down at him. 'And now you have your happy ending and your story is finished.'

'Oh, no, never finished,' Luke replied. 'Only the first act, for us. And I do have some more work to do on the first act, too.'

'Now what?' Theresa asked, pretending to look severe. 'Am I going to go through a wedding, only to discover that the minister is really not a minister, after all?'

'Never that,' Luke said seriously. 'We will have the most official wedding that ever was. No, my love, I'm going to turn our story, just as it happened, into a screenplay. Of course, the names will be changed to protect us innocents, and most of the parts will be played by actors, but I think the Brimstones will be terrific as themselves, don't you?'

'Fantastic,' Theresa agreed. She lay across Luke, her breasts responding with a tantalising feeling of swollen longing to the

roughness of his chest beneath her. 'Darling love,' she said huskily, 'are you through talking yet? I think Dr Longfreud just zapped me with something from Libido.' She let her hand stray below Luke's waist. 'I think she got you, too.'

'Mmm,' Luke sighed. 'Do that again. Oh, yes...' He smiled dreamily at Theresa. 'Why don't you take off the rest of my clothes for me, caressing as you go? I've always dreamed of having you do that. Then I'll do the same for you.'

'All right,' Theresa said softly. She got to her knees and carefully unzipped Luke's trousers, slowly pulling them down, taking time to answer his request with gentle hands. By the time she had finished, she was so aroused that she felt that her entire body was trembling with desire. When Luke knelt astride her and kissed each new spot he uncovered as he removed her jeans, she felt as if sky-rockets were exploding both inside and out, dazzling her with sensations so overwhelming that she could scarcely breath. She

held out her arms, and Luke lowered himself into them, devouring her with a kiss of such passionate hunger that Theresa gave a deep moan of longing. 'Oh, Luke,' she murmured, 'I love you so. I can't live without you any longer. Please...'

'Yes,' Luke said hoarsely. 'Now the time is right.' He entered her carefully, gently, as she knew he would. Then, as she arched toward him eagerly, he let the full fire of his passion have its way, sweeping the world away until they had reached that special world where lovers find release.

Afterwards, Luke lay beside her, his hands stroking her with delicate tenderness, his mouth feathering her with light kisses. 'It's something to go from hell to heaven in one day, isn't it?' he murmured.

'Mmm-hmm,' Theresa agreed, her hands exploring Luke's lean, hard body with a new possessiveness. 'All in all, I think I'd rather stay in heaven.'

Luke smiled. 'I think we can stay there for a while,' he said, tucking Theresa close and

angling one leg across her. 'But even this might get boring eventually. I heard of a fellow who tried it. He found this strange, golden gate right in the middle of an empty car park, and when he opened it . . .'

Theresa sighed contentedly and wiggled her hips against Luke, feeling him begin to respond again. No place on heaven or earth would be boring with Luke Thorndike for company. It was like having a magical gate behind which lurked continual, fantastic surprises. Only a fool would be afraid to enter that gate, and she was no longer afraid.

'Theresa,' Luke said softly, 'are you listening?'

'I was trying,' she replied, 'but it was hard. All I could think of was how much I love you and how happy I'm going to be married to you. Would you mind starting over?'

'Never mind,' Luke said, his eyes filled with love. 'I like your story better. Say that again.'

Theresa did.

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The agent looked suitably taken aback. 'The money...'

'Come and see me on Monday. I'll fix it up then.' He didn't give a damn what Toni cost him. If he had to make a fortune every day of his life to keep her, he'd do it. Then he remembered another thing she had said. 'By the way, that building where the office is—I'm interested in buying it. Work out a deal.' He gave the agent his card. 'If you can come up with the right price, we can do business together.'

'You want to buy it?' the agent repeated, not quite believing his ears. He had come to collect a debt and he was having a commission dangled in front of his eyes as he had never envisaged in his whole career of letting rooms!

'If the price is right,' Noah affirmed. 'My wife...' she was virtually his and it sounded so good to say it '...tells me it will be an important building one day. I'm inclined to believe her.'

'Yes...yes,' the agent agreed eagerly. After all, if his wife was Antonia Braden, she could make a man believe anything. Perhaps she was

right anyway. Maybe it would be an important building one day. It was worthwhile thinking about it. In any event, since he was going to get his money, he was not about to argue about the building. 'Goodnight, sir. Thank you, sir. I'll see you Monday, sir,' he said, and left while the going was good.

Noah closed the door. He felt very pleased with himself. He would give Toni the building too. But first the emeralds. He went to the wall-safe and took out the jeweller's box. He had meant to use the picnic as the occasion to propose to her once more. He had bought the emeralds to add persuasion to his suit for marriage. Toni had messed up his timing again, but this was much better than any plan he had ever made.

He laughed softly to himself as the reason for her timing clicked into place. Mr Templeton... Lillian Devereux... Diana Goldbach. Toni's Mr Templeton had been the plant at the auction, and the whole devious—but brilliant—build-up to the night had Toni's fingerprints all over the whole operation. He had been very slow to cotton on to what had been happening. Toni... He grinned. What

a tricky, wonderfully challenging woman she was! He would, of course, never let on what he knew. Two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars he had paid for that picnic...

'Noah...it's very lonely in this big bed all by myself,' Toni cried out plaintively.

Worth every cent of what he had paid, Noah thought with satisfaction. Almost a bargain, really. He headed back to the bedroom. She was sprawled across the bed, stark naked, and his pulse instantly leapt into overdrive. He put the jeweller's box down on the dressing-table and stripped off his clothes. The way Toni watched him excited him even more.

'You beat all the statistics, Noah,' she said appreciatively. 'I like to feel your muscles.'

Noah knew he wasn't built like Mr Universe. He was strong, but nothing unique. Nevertheless, if Toni liked to think he was, Noah was not about to correct her. Perhaps he should start working out at a gym.

'How did you manage to get pregnant so quickly?' he asked, still amazed that she had allowed it to happen.

'It wasn't supposed to happen this quickly. How could I possibly know you were so potent that you'd turn all the medical averages upside-down? Some people try to have babies for months. Years! It's all your fault, Noah. And now you have to pay the penalty,' she said archly.

He laughed and handed her the jeweller's box. 'Will this do for starters?'

She opened the box and her gasp of surprised delight was music to his ears. 'For me? Oh, Noah! This isn't looking after me...this is out and out spoiling!'

He sprawled beside her and lifted out the ring. 'First, this one...' He slid it on her finger. 'Now, you're formally betrothed to me.' He handed her the earrings to put on. 'These are to match your eyes.' Then he took up the necklace and fastened it around her throat. 'And this is for being so generous to me,' he concluded softly, his eyes loving her for giving him his child.

She took a deep breath. Then softly, simply, she said, 'I love you, Noah.' And in her eyes was the reflection of what he felt for her, and he knew in that moment a sense of utter com-

pleteness that he would hold within him for the rest of his life.

'I love you, Antonia,' he replied, hoping she would not deny him this time.

'Yes. I know,' she said softly, and held out her arms to him. 'But all my friends call me Toni.'

'The people who love you most deeply call you Antonia,' he said simply.

It was a beautiful thing to say. Noah was like that, Toni thought, revelling in her love for him, and his for her. She wondered why it had taken her so long to accept what they really felt for each other. But that didn't matter now.

They had made love countless times, but this was the best ever, from beginning to end, and even the peaceful aftermath held a very special bliss as they lay contentedly in each other's arms.

'Noah, you're going to have to share this pregnancy completely with me,' Toni suddenly declared. 'I might not be very good at it. I haven't had any practice.'

He smiled in the darkness. 'Is that supposed to be a penalty?'

'Well, you made it happen before I was really ready,' she argued.

'Does it worry you?' he asked.

She sighed and snuggled closer. 'Not if you look after me.'

He kissed the wild unruly curls away from her temples. 'I'll look after you. Always.'

'Mmm...' It was a hum of pleasure. 'How many children would you like to have, Noah?'

'However many you want,' he answered, not even pausing to think.

It was this woman in his arms he wanted most of all...flesh of his flesh, heart of his heart, soul of his soul. He listened to her muse over various numbers of children, agreeing with everything she said, knowing that she would always be the centre of his existence. Undoubtedly she would shake the earth around him innumerable times, as she had done from the moment he had first set eyes on her, but he would never want to live without her.

She was...would always be...his wife!

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